

# Lateral

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Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

## Editors' Introduction: New Milestones, New Initiatives

by Robert F. Carley, SAJ, Eero Laine and Chris Alen Sula | Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

**ABSTRACT** As we begin this second decade of *Lateral*, we reflect on the origins of the journal and new initiatives underway. We also consider the precarious nature of scholarly publishing and editing in the pandemic and reaffirm our commitment to this care work. This issue features three articles—two of which emerged from our articles-in-progress workshop at last year's Cultural Studies Association annual meeting—as well as the 2021 Randy Martin Prize winning essay and a number of book reviews. We invite applications for our editorial team and proposals for new initiatives at the journal.

**KEYWORDS** cultural studies, publishing, scholarly communication, pandemic

This issue begins the second decade of publishing for *Lateral*, which emerged alongside the Cultural Studies Association < <https://www.culturalstudiesassociation.org> > (CSA) as a sustained, collaborative, and experimental space in electronic publishing. The initial effort consisted of four research threads: "Theory and Method," < <https://csalateral.org/archive/section/theory/> > curated by Patricia Clough; "Culture Industries," < <https://csalateral.org/archive/section/culture-industries/> > curated by Jaafar Aksikas; "Universities in Question," < <https://csalateral.org/archive/section/universities-in-question/> > curated by Bruce Burgett and Randy Martin; and "Mobilisations, Interventions, and Cultural Policy," < <https://csalateral.org/archive/section/mobilisations-interventions-and-cultural-policy/> > curated by Emma Dowling. These threads could develop over time and between the annual conferences, they reflected core ideas that could span issues and volumes, and, when they needed to, they could publish in a ready and responsive manner, such as the manifestos < <https://csalateral.org/issue/2/manifestos-introduction/> > published in Issue 2, which included the Occupy Wall Street declaration < <https://csalateral.org/issue/2/manifestos-occupy-wall-street/> > and solidarity statements from comrades in Cairo < <https://csalateral.org/issue/2/manifestos-solidarity-from-cairo/> > and the Humanities Action Committee from University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras < <https://csalateral.org/issue/2/manifestos-ocuparte-humanities-manifesto/> > . In other

words, the concept of threads reflected both the careful development of scholarship and research and the advantages of publishing through a digital platform that was radically open access and beholden to no one other than the community of scholars, practitioners, and activists associated and allied with the CSA.

The inaugural energies that helped shape *Lateral* shifted and changed over time, and at the CSA meeting at Villanova University in 2015, *Lateral* was reviewed by an ad hoc committee drawn from the CSA's membership. Shortly thereafter, a new core group of editors began developing the iteration of *Lateral* we're familiar with today. The journal added a book reviews section < <http://csalateral.org/archive/reviews/>> ; Forums < <http://csalateral.org/forums/>> , which includes media-rich and accessibly-written pieces that are imagined as tools for conversation, education, and agitation; and the Years in Cultural Studies timeline project < <http://csalateral.org/years/>> , which offers essays focused on specific years in the history of cultural studies as pedagogical resource, a place for documentation and excavation, and an opportunity for more storytelling.

As we enter *Lateral's* second decade, we are looking to expand significantly: towards publishing short-form open access and print books, adding new co-editors < <https://csalateral.org/contribute/editors-and-new-initiatives>> to contribute to regular issues and to assist in new initiatives, and also seeking new initiatives < <https://csalateral.org/contribute/editors-and-new-initiatives>> from contributors who might organize and pilot their own projects through *Lateral's* publishing platform. We remain committed to creative and interactive uses of technology, and this issue is no exception, offering our first article accompanied by a playlist that provides audio-visual context for readers. At the core of *Lateral's* practice is a commitment to radical open access publishing.

At the same time as we seek to expand and develop *Lateral* in new directions, we also recognize the impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on our contributors and on the scholarly community at large. Articles take longer to write and revise amid sickness, fatigue, and other pandemic effects; reviewers take longer to evaluate work, when they are able to do so at all. While research specifically about COVID-19 has been sped through publication, in part through preprints and accelerated peer review<sup>1</sup>, other work, particularly work outside of the sciences and public health, has slowed to a crawl for many journals. As Natalie Oswin, managing editor of *Society and Space*, writes, "Now, we most often send out 10 to 15 reviewer invitations to yield even two reviewer commitments, and reports regularly come in months late with a hefty percentage never materializing at all. The system's breakdown has greatly accelerated, in tune with the pandemic's characteristic ability to widen pre-existing cracks into chasms."<sup>2</sup> Like Oswin, we have no easy solutions to offer here, and we also express our gratitude to the authors and reviewers who have

generously contributed their time and intellectual labor to the pieces published in this issue. If anything, this crisis returns us to the notion of scholarly publishing and editing as a form of care work, and we reaffirm our political commitment to and engagement with that work, including through such venues as our [articles-in-progress workshop](https://www.culturalstudiesassociation.org/conference-960395.html#:~:text=workshop) <<https://www.culturalstudiesassociation.org/conference-960395.html#:~:text=workshop>> at the annual CSA conference. Last year's workshop, in fact, yielded the first two pieces published in this issue.

Jeremy Chow and Sage Gerson's "[Wasted: Wastewater, Hygiene Theatrics, & Contaminated Imaginaries](https://csalateral.org/issue/11-1/wasted-wastewater-hygiene-theatrics-contaminated-imaginaries-chow-gerson/)" <<https://csalateral.org/issue/11-1/wasted-wastewater-hygiene-theatrics-contaminated-imaginaries-chow-gerson/>> opens this issue with an analysis of the ever-present but often-unseen streams of waste that flow across the United States and beyond. This collaboratively authored piece brings together two channels of thought: a first-hand tour of Santa Barbara's El Estero water treatment facility, and reflections on narratives of contagion surrounding COVID-19, particularly sewage testing, and the intersecting HIV/AIDS pandemic, both of which have heavily impacted queer and BIPOC communities. Chow and Gerson posit the notion "hygiene theatrics" to describe the performance of hygiene, cleanliness, and purity surrounding waste(water), in contrast to notions of dirtiness, contagion, and their raced and homophobic associations in environmental and health public discourses. In considering wastewater, Chow and Gerson note other failures of infrastructure, including the 2011 Fukushima reactor explosion, which will leak radioactive waste into the Pacific Ocean for the next forty years, including to California's Central Coast, the site where their essay begins. The two authors converge and diverge repeatedly throughout the course of their essay, weaving together personal experiences and reflections with theoretical frameworks and analysis. Chow finds that wastewater methodologies are irredeemably bound to binaries of "clean" bodies and "dirty" bodies (and the possibility of contamination of the former by the latter), while Gerson draws some hope for remediation from her experience at El Estero, which, in the end, protects communities from waterborne illness. Above all, Chow and Gerson point us to wastewater as a potent site for interrogating power through its histories, narratives, and impacts on humans and nonhumans alike.

Lucy March's "[Satisfaction Guaranteed: Techno-Orientalism in Vaporwave](https://csalateral.org/issue/11-1/satisfaction-guaranteed-techno-orientalism-vaporwave-march/)" <<https://csalateral.org/issue/11-1/satisfaction-guaranteed-techno-orientalism-vaporwave-march/>> analyzes a genre of music whose singles, albums, performances, merchandise, scene, and subculture are almost entirely or "extremely" online. March is one of a handful of scholars to analyze vaporwave and its spin-off sub-genres. Although the "heyday" of vaporwave has passed, March notes that its aesthetics currently pervade contemporary culture from Ariana Grande's "5 Rings" video down to our meme-saturated social media feeds. By looking at the multi-accentual paratexts and the ways that they both inflect and

play with layers of images synthesized (by Vaporwave artists and enthusiasts) from out of the 1980s market extensivity of Japanese technology, entertainment, and design but, also, with a broad range of pop culture imaginaries (prevalent, more generally, during the 80s), March diagnoses vaporwave as a site of pleasure, anxiety, and orientalism. Her prognosis is that vaporwave is not only crucially dependent on gender-based stereotypes and online anonymity but, ultimately, that vaporwave reproduces its own lexicon of orientalist, sexist, and Western white-supremacist images dangerously cloaked in a hauntological mix of pleasure, nostalgia, and cool that never was (and only is online). Where other scholarship has focused on whether or not vaporwave is a critique or endorsement of neoliberal capital, techno-orientalist, or genre-bending (or shattering), March moves affirmatively through each of these arguments absorbing the fullness of the vaporwave genre through its scholarship, imagery, sounds, audience reception, "death," and afterlife. March's essay extends and complicates research on internet music and music scenes and contributes, more generally, to global research into new media and virtually mediated global communities.

Chris J. Young's "Scene Tracing: The Replication and Transformation of Global Industry, Movements, and Genres in Local Game Production" < <https://csalateral.org/issue/11-1/scene-tracing-replication-transformation-global-industry-movements-genres-local-game-production-young/> > examines localized production through an explication and troubling of the notion of "scenes" as both temporal and geographically-particular communities. Young's focus on video game design and development opens the analysis to move beyond physical space toward virtual and remote community building. Employing an ethnographic approach with repeat and in-depth interviews with a number of gamemakers, Young explores the connections and webs and networks of creators and content that spans from the Toronto game scene toward planetary connections and exchanges. In doing so, Young offers both an exciting analysis of the interplays between local and globalizing scenes and an important model for marking and mapping the complicated and overlapping groups that inform and take part in cultural production.

*Lateral* is pleased to publish Larissa A. Irizarry's "Alter Egoing: The Shifting Affects of Janelle Monáe," < <https://csalateral.org/issue/11-1/alter-egoing-shifting-affects-janelle-monae-irizarry/> > winner of the 2021 Randy Martin Prize from CSA. Irizarry offers a close reading of the 2018 album *Dirty Computer* and Monáe's performative use of alter egos, specifically the androids Cindy Mayweather, who switches on her Black skin to fulfill her role as a racialized entertainer and employs dandyism in her dress both as queer and as a tool of respectability, and Jane57821, whose "dirty" memories, which include a relationship with a man and a woman, are analyzed and ultimately wiped by two white men at the behest of a totalitarian government. Monáe's use of these alter egos thus effects critiques of Blackness, womanhood, and heteronormativity in the United States and, according to

Irizarry, responds to the shifting electoral politics between Barack Obama's historic election in 2008 and its subsequent backlash, culminating in the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Both political campaigns employed the rhetoric of optimism—"audacious hopefulness" in the case of Obama, and the white male nostalgia of Trump's "Make America Great Again"—an affect that Irizarry sees Monáe critically adopting in her 2018 album. Informed by and diverging from an earlier, Afropessimist response to Obama's audacious hope, *Dirty Computer* lifts up "Black girl magic" and enjoins, "let the vagina have a monologue" (an unfortunate conflation of womanhood with biology, as Irizarry notes). Irizarry describes Monáe's critical optimism as a reflexive process in which the marginalized subject is aware of the material realities that negate their personhood and yet still defies the futures and outcomes that have been relegated to them. By charting shifts in the performer's alter egoing over time, Irizarry explores how Monáe makes space for queer Black women in a racist, heteropatriarchal society.

We end this introduction with an invitation to continue working together laterally—as authors, editors, readers, reviewers. We're all working this out and none of us is truly doing it alone. We hope we have the opportunity to work with you in the future. Please be in touch and we'll do the same as we request your expertise for article reviews and continue to invite work for the journal.

## Notes

1. Ludo Waltman, Stephen Pinfield, Narmin Rzayeva, Susana Oliveira Henriques, Zhichao Fang, Johanna Brumberg, Sarah Greaves, Phil Hurst, Andy Collings, Arianne Heinrichs, Nick Lindsay, Catriona J. MacCallum, Daniel Morgan, Susanna-Assunta Sansone, and Sowmya Swaminathan, "Scholarly Communication in Times of Crisis: The Response of the Scholarly Communication System to the COVID-19 Pandemic," Research on Research Institute (December 2021), <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.17125394.v1> < <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.17125394.v1> > . ↩
  2. Natalie Oswin, "The View from Here," *Society and Space* (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1177/02637758221103197> < <https://doi.org/10.1177/02637758221103197> > . ↩
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## Article details

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## Wasted: Wastewater, Hygiene Theatrics, and Contaminated Imaginaries

by Jeremy Chow and Sage Gerson | Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

**ABSTRACT** This collaborative essay takes up three pungent streams of wastewater to address how environments, politics, communities, and power are mediated by liquid waste: urine, feces, and everything else recklessly flushed down toilets, washed down drains, stored in pits, and dumped in the ocean. "Wasted" looks to the multi-scalar worlds of wastewater by centering waste sites and COVID-19 concerns regarding wastewater virality. First, our tour of Santa Barbara's El Estero Water Resource Center brings us to the variegated, embodied, multi-sensory, and multispecies communities of wastewater. El Estero provides an odoriferous infrastructural current through which we follow wastewater and the socialites and environments it mediates on California's Central Coast. We then move to the ways wastewater has been interwoven with global pandemic fears to address how human waste retains infectious COVID-19 viral material even after it has been flushed away. COVID-19, in other words, haunts the infrastructural ports through which wastewater is funneled. We conclude with wastewater's epochal effects within the Anthropocene. Throughout, we offer the term "hygiene theatrics" to identify how the performance of hygiene, cleanliness, and purity rely on dichotomous constructions of dirtiness and cleanliness that reinforce structural power dynamics including racism and homophobia. "Wasted" is a collaborative feminist and queer experiment in form and methodology that explores wastewater as both a material reality and a theoretical apparatus that is informed by and contributes to the environmental humanities, infrastructure studies, and feminist and queer science studies.

**KEYWORDS** hygiene theater, queer, water, sexuality, waste, COVID-19, infrastructure, wastewater, California, HIV/AIDS, Anthropocene

"Water, the condition of all possibility, has become the unheeded recipient of the material wastes and toxins of late-capitalist production and consumption. Even as its continual movement between bodies and across borders defies the economic mechanics of quantification and instrumentalization, water is commodified, turned into measurable units, and sold for profit. As it changes forms and cycles through various manifestations of bodies, societies, and politics, diffusing, spreading, and bringing back to us the very matter we cast away, water shows us that at every level we are of water. But to harm water is not simply to harm ourselves; it is, as so many ecologists have shown, to harm the conditions for the proliferation of life itself."

– Mielle Chandler and Astrida Neimanis<sup>1</sup>

"All is not well with the waters of the world—nor with the social relations mediated by their flows."

– Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

**Wastewater is everywhere.** Experiences of place, embodiment, identity, and environment are mediated by wastewater. The pungent life of liquid waste (urine, feces, and everything else recklessly flushed down toilets, washed down drains, stored in pits, and dumped in the ocean), as Myra Hird writes, is "world-making."<sup>3</sup> Wastewater materially sutures bio-, geo-, and stratospheres and its flows between these spheres "mobilize relations."<sup>4</sup> Wastewater interstitially streams between and among the human, more-than-human, aqueous, terrestrial, and microbial; it thus connects and fosters a global system that realizes the various entanglements of human bodies, oceans, interior and arterial waterways, and public water supplies. Wastewater comprises many bodies of water—the human body, of course, being one such vessel connected to countless other human and nonhuman ports. It is this movement across and between bodies conceived of as discreet, we argue, that stokes fears of contact with wastewater, and its perceived (viral) contamination. In what follows, we consider the fears of non-hygienic contamination that invariably shape a relationship with wastewater in the United States. We explore the realities and insinuations of wastewater first at the local level before moving outward to think through the visceral fears surrounding wastewater realized by the uncontained spread of COVID-19.

**Wastewater is destabilizing.** Waste, as Sarah A. Moore reminds us, can disturb set values, politics, and notions of stability.<sup>5</sup> This point is echoed by Hird's provocation that the concept of waste is always already predicated on indeterminacy, which feminist epistemologies find potentially emancipatory.<sup>6</sup> Bringing the rich theorizing about waste to an aqueous analysis of (waste)water, we dive into the multi-sensory and multi-scalar

worlds of wastewater, and the ways that it saturates infrastructural and viral discourses. Fears of wastewater and its potential for shapeshifting bodies of all sorts contaminate and seep into environmental and health public discourses, particularly those related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Shit is, it turns out, very good to think with, learn from, and (cognitively) wade into.

**Wastewater is media.**<sup>7</sup> Reconceptualizing wastewater as media enables us to consider what wastewater communicates about bodies and societies; how it resides in the middle, between human bodies and other bodies of water; how it is remediated through microbial aeration; and importantly how it is constructed through pandemic, hygiene, viral paranoia, and contamination. In short, wastewater as media visualizes embodiment, material waste, infrastructure systems, and natural/cultural entanglement.

**Wastewater is both theory and method.** Cecilia Chen suggests that “The movements of water in our daily lives link us to places and to each other,” thus, “thinking with water asks” that “we consider ongoing relations with others—whether these relations join us to other locations, other beings, or other events and spacetimes.”<sup>8</sup> This essay explores the connections across and through beings, locations, events, and spacetimes that thinking with wastewater makes possible, streaming between the place-based and planetary. These watery relations, according to Chen and which we take up here, “may include communities of disease and environmental toxicity as well as the many everyday watery places that we make together. Thinking with watery places asks us to recognize places as always permeable and permeated with water.”<sup>9</sup> Of particular interest to us is the way that wastewater links the local and global within an aqueous system of interconnection. Our work centers our own situated knowledges and place-based experiences of liquid waste in Central California, before following wastewater’s dissemination into the Pacific Ocean to consider how such an agentic force insinuates itself within the local, the global, and the epochal. Our focus on watery circulation and interconnection does not ignore the blockages or chokepoints that hinder wastewater’s global flows—to this end, we understand the storage tanks and pits we examine in our third stream as attempts to contain and choke wastewater’s movement. Our focus on wastewater is not to idealize interconnection or uncomplicatedly celebrate circulation, but instead to highlight how liquid waste resists human efforts at containment and the ways that watery relation and interconnection can be toxic, violent, and infective.

To think alongside the multiple and multi-scalar relations interconnected by wastewater, methodologically, we begin locally with an exploration of, what Chen describes above as “the everyday watery places humans make together,”<sup>10</sup> exemplified by Santa Barbara’s El Estero water treatment facility (Figure 1). We open our analysis of wastewater with a tour of Santa Barbara’s wastewater facility—with the local and experiential—to forefront the

embodied and place-based specificity of wastewater.<sup>11</sup> Sage's italicized, firsthand wastewater tour examines, through narrative and reflection, one way of thinking with wastewater prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her firsthand account of El Estero details a site-based account of wastewater's situated tendrils, which we employ as a springboard for then thinking about the larger circulation of wastewater and its rhetorics.



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/El-Estero-151-Jeremy-Chow.jpg>

Figure 1. El Estero Wastewater Treatment Facility. Santa Barbara, California. Photo courtesy of the City of Santa Barbara.

Next, zooming out, we consider the “communities of disease” of wastewater’s liquid relations<sup>12</sup>—specifically, the ways that fears of wastewater contamination have been deployed during the COVID-19 pandemic in the US. While our interest in wastewater began before COVID-19, we quickly noticed how pandemic fears of viral contamination and contagion rapidly spread to wastewater. This shift outwards enables us to think about the visceral fears of wastewater realized by the expansive spread of viruses—both past and present. Our turn to wastewater as a medium for the spread of COVID-19 allows for a range of media to inform how we approach the digital dissemination of pandemic fears, (mis)information, and analogous relationships with other viral exposures.

The pandemic has exacerbated growing concerns about contact and contagion, especially among environmental, aqueous, and human bodies, and it has, we have observed, been repeatedly compared to HIV/AIDS. Not only are COVID-19 and HIV/AIDS research repeatedly conjured in the same sentence, knowledge about COVID-19, viral safety, and creating communities of care and communication during an outbreak, are often metaphorized/theorized through HIV/AIDS. While we certainly do not conflate (or wish to

reproduce the conflation of) COVID-19 and HIV/AIDS, we argue that looking through wastewater provides an aqueous methodology that can engage both how these viral connections are communicated through popular media discourses as well as how viral contagion materially travels. Wastewater as media, then, encompasses how wastewater mediates COVID-19-infection and is, we argue, imbued with a queer agency that plays into long-held concerns over hygiene. In this stream, then, we think with COVID-19 to demonstrate wastewater's affiliation with discourses of queerness, sexuality, and race.

Finally, we move to wastewater in the Anthropocene. We grapple with the global environmental toxicity of wastewater by concluding with two examples of how it resists enclosure and control: the 2021 leak at Florida's Piney Point waste treatment facility and Japan's 2021 decision to dump contaminated wastewater from the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster into the Pacific Ocean. Our conclusion frames our temporal and archival concerns within the historical and ongoing environmental violences of the Anthropocene; wastewater is invariably part of Anthropocene slow violence, neocolonialism, climate change, drought, and sea level rise. This final stream of wastewater in the Anthropocene remains critical of the Anthropocene's flattening of human hierarchies and power structures, and its intensification of colonialism and environmental racism.<sup>13</sup>

Our analysis of the impacts of wastewater's cultural and environmental ripples is informed by scholarship in the environmental humanities, critiques of Western colonial modernity informed by Native American and Indigenous Studies, infrastructure studies, and feminist and queer science studies—fields that allow us to offer a multi-scalar overview of wastewater as it informs place and pandemic and interacts with human hierarchies and systems of power. Wastewater is entangled with major contemporary issues such as human cultural relationships to nature, the infrastructures that undergird Western colonial modernity, experiences of pandemic, and environmental toxicity and degradation. Thinking through and with wastewater, we propose, is one methodology for holding multiple multi-scalar issues in tension with each other. Ultimately, we follow the circuitous and interconnected flows of wastewater in and through these watery places, relations, and interconnections to make evident that thinking with wastewater is both theory/metaphor and practice/methodology.

## Collaborative Feminist and Queer Methods for the Environmental Humanities

What follows here is born out of numerous conversations between friends. Wastewater, we realized, sits at the nexus of many of our shared concerns. Our use of "we" throughout is not to erase power relations and difference in a move towards the falsely universal,<sup>14</sup> but is

instead a specific reference to our (Jeremy and Sage's) larger collaboration and shared interests in the environmental humanities and feminist and queer theories. Our "we" works against the discomfiting way traditional academic writing displaces and invisibilizes who does the act of writing. Our "we" draws attention to our embodiment and collaboration, making us present and visible on the page. We do not shy away from the disagreements, excitements, and connections that collaboration endows; we do not seek to collapse our distinct voices into a smooth and singular authorial one. Indeed, there are places where "we" is deliberately abandoned for a more specific, italicized "*I*." Our "we" is a commitment to upholding our distinct, individual modes of interpretation and metacognition while acknowledging the messiness and plurality of collaboration. The dynamism of collaboration is rendered through our experiment in form—stylistic experimentation, citational praxis, notes, and non-hierarchical juxtapositions—that make evident disagreements and differences in voice and style.<sup>15</sup> Our collaboration enables an interdisciplinary methodology that provides a collaborative feminist and queer approach for doing work in the environmental humanities.

**Wastewater necessitates collaborative methods.** As Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis assert, "As bodies of water—which we all inescapably are—we are all (perhaps unwittingly) collaborating, all of the time . . . . We do not idealize collaboration. It is sweaty work replete with tense negotiations. Thinking with water, however, asks that we attend to the way we collaborate—whether in scholarly and creative pursuits or in our ecopolitical endeavours."<sup>16</sup> Our collaborative methods here follow aqueous ones that uphold flows and streams of knowledge and cooperation that converge and diverge across maps of epistemology and experience. Water's fluidity is thus an organizing principle for us that maintains metaphoricity (like those of the streams and flows just acknowledged) and materiality (including the examples we explore below) as equally informative. We embark on a material-semiotic exploration that refuses to, as Philip Steinberg avers, prioritize one mode of aqueous thinking over another—the material and semiotic cannot be analytically unlinked from one another.<sup>17</sup> A collaborative, humanistic methodology demands the figurative, the literal, and the other.

Our assemblaged work here, as much as it is a cultural analysis, is also admittedly curatorial; that is, we offer three potential streams by which to visualize and imagine the rhetorical placement of wastewater in the contemporary imaginary.<sup>18</sup> A collaborative feminist and queer humanistic methodology benefits from a critical curatorial eye. Each of these streams approaches wastewater from different purviews and narrative styles. These streams, furthermore, model our experimental methodology and collaboration; that is, they do not reduce experiences of or ideas about wastewater to a flattened singularity. This commitment to formal plurality and collaboration borrows from wastewater and its various material, epistemological, and discursive realities. Our conclusion, which is in two



(potentially irreconcilable) parts, perhaps exemplifies this best as we showcase our different ways of theorizing wastewater in the Anthropocene.

## El Estero / The Estuary



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/image-Jeremy-Chow.jpg>

El Estero Wastewater Treatment Facility. Santa Barbara, California. Photo courtesy of the City of Santa Barbara.

To celebrate Earth Day 2019, the city of Santa Barbara, California rehabilitated 4.2 miles of sewer pipe—a crumbling infrastructure first installed ninety years earlier—and in so doing unveiled the newly-renovated El Estero Water Resource Center, which manages the wastewater of the city's 93,000 residents. Santa Barbara's history is one of polluted waters and their aftermaths. It is the site of multiple oil spills, most famously in 1969 by Unocal Oil. The 1969 spill and subsequent environmental activism in response to it are often considered formative events in the mainstream US environmental movement.<sup>19</sup>

Wastewater enters El Estero by way of liquid and solid human waste funneled in from ports and pipelines crosshatched across Santa Barbara's 42 square miles. The reclaimed wastewater takes one of four possible forms: (1) desalinated brine admixture, which is then released 1.5 miles off California's Central Coast into the Pacific Ocean; (2) recycled water for irrigation in public spaces such as University of California, Santa Barbara's main campus and Santa Barbara city parks; (3) compostable bio-solids used for fertilizer by local farms;



or, (4) converted biogas, which is used to generate electricity onsite and power at El Estero.<sup>20</sup>

El Estero, Spanish for “the estuary,” treats six million gallons of wastewater per day, with the goal of “saf[e] recycling.” The history of Santa Barbara is one of multiple and ongoing colonial regimes, starting with the Spanish and continuing into the present by the US. El Estero’s Spanish name demonstrates how the region continues to glorify its colonial history through its celebration of Spanish culture: building codes which uphold and require Spanish architecture features, its romanticization of the Santa Barbara Mission and erasure of the mission system’s history of colonial genocide. As this suggests, US infrastructure systems construct colonial ecologies, contouring built and “natural” environments. El Estero and Santa Barbara are located on the unceded Indigenous lands and waters of the Chumash people—the traditional and expert custodians of the region. As settler scholars, we both recognize and acknowledge that the infrastructures that enable settler ongoingness are colonial incursions in Indigenous ways of living with the lands and waters of this region.

Drawing inspiration from Macarena Gómez-Barris’ “submerged perspective,” through which “local terrains” become “sources of knowledge, vitality, and livability,”<sup>21</sup> Sage immersed herself within the multisensory and multi-scalar life of wastewater in Santa Barbara to “better see what lies below the surface of liquid” and “see what lies within the ecologies all around us.”<sup>22</sup> In the account of El Estero that follows, Sage employs a first-person narrative style to highlight the personal, embodied, and experiential nature of the tour. The turn to narrative and the use of an embodied “I” is not a turn away from the analytical or interpretative; instead the following narrative shares Sage’s immersion in El Estero’s multisensory, multispecies world.

*Pulling into El Estero’s short drive, I’m faced with a low-slung complex of buildings, typical of Central and Southern California. Still in the passenger seat of my shared carpool, the full pungent force of the water treatment complex hasn’t hit me yet, and instead I’m faced with a very green, well-landscaped campus that stands out against the rest of the fairly arid region. Exiting the car, swampy smells begin to waft into my nose, though they are still far from overpowering. Before being shown the aeration tanks, clarifiers, or anaerobic digesters, El Estero staff welcome those of us eager for a tour of water infrastructure in action into the main building’s conference room for an introduction to the new facility (unveiled in 2019), and a few film clips that offer an overview of the scope of the facility’s operations.*

*I meet my tour guides at the brief screening, and they seem enthusiastic to talk to me and the small group of wastewater tourists I am part of about what they do at El Estero, answering all our pre-tour questions thoroughly and amiably. The pre-tour film clips*

*begin to construct a public-facing narrative of the site of El Estero and its history as an infrastructural complex that mediates cultural relationships to the environment, manages resources, and contours the built and natural environments of the Santa Barbara region. Participating in the tour allows me to frame El Estero as a site of interest and concern<sup>23</sup> (bringing it from its infrastructurally backgrounded location to the forefront of my understanding of and relationship to the region), and to take part in the specific natural/cultural practice of treating (waste)water.<sup>24</sup> As El Estero's name implies in its reference to an ecological zone (estuaries), wastewater treatment relies on entangled natural processes and human social/cultural practices and priorities.*

*After leaving the conference room, the tour begins. The group I am part of experiences the treatment facility in the same order as the wastewater, beginning with the influent wet well, where the wastewater is initially collected and screened for large debris that could block and/or damage treatment machinery. Next, the group travels to the covered primary clarifiers, where the wastewater is left to sit so the solids settle to the bottom. Then, our tour guides climb a set of outdoor stairs and lead us to view the aeration basins and secondary clarifiers. Up the stairs along the aeration basins, I am greeted with a beautiful view of the Pacific Ocean in the near distance, which draws my attention to the fact that much of Santa Barbara's treated wastewater is released back into the Pacific. Ecologically, estuaries are liminal places, where ocean tides meet the mouths of rivers and streams. El Estero is aptly named—sitting near the coast, its treatment infrastructure mediates the river of liquid human waste and the surrounding environs, coming between its stream and the ocean. El Estero is, in some ways, a human-made transition zone, a natural/cultural ecotone.*

*Our tour guides instruct us that it's safe to touch the stair rails and other accessibility structures, but to avoid touching our faces afterward and be prepared to wash our hands at the end of the tour. This instruction draws participants' attention to what Melody Jue—one of the organizers of my wastewater tour—theorizes as "the porosity of embodiment" in her work thinking through the element of sea water.<sup>25</sup> By far the most olfactory, the primary and secondary stages also visually showcase all the multispecies entanglements of the wastewater treatment process. Not only can I smell the biological processes as the "good" bacteria, harvested from the collected wastewater, feed on and breakdown the organic material present in the liquid wastewater, but I can also see signs and byproducts of this process in the sludgy water. Despite the industrial setting, it feels like an intimate interspecies interaction, connecting the human body (of water) to these basins through the bacteria that make homes and larders of both. The multispecies lifeworld of the human body is both what marks this water as "waste," while also, seemingly paradoxically, providing important parts of the waste "treatment" process. This stage of the tour challenges cultural*

constructions of cleanliness, Western conceptions of the human as discrete and individually bounded, and instead draws attention to the multispecies worlds the human body houses and relies on. Drawing on Stacy Alaimo's influential notion of transcorporeality, which works to erode any firm bodily boundary between inside and outside, Jue considers the ways that "watery feminist materialisms . . . change our self-conception, encouraging us to see our own distributed embodiment as a condition that is attached to the ecological welfare of a sphere larger than our own body."<sup>26</sup> As I move through the large, open-air basins, the water becomes clearer, less opaque, and other multispecies encounters take place. Migrating ducks wheel, land, and take off from some of the basins, feeding on the green algae and plant matter in turn being fed by the rich contents of the basins.

Lest this description sound too idealistic in its marvel at the multispecies worlds the human body is part of and comprises, it is important to note that the water is later treated with chlorine to destroy any lingering bacteria. (The bacteria feeding on the organic matter found in the wastewater are only considered "good," part of wastewater's treatment, when they are controlled and contained within their specific aeration basins.) The multispecies collaboration of the wastewater treatment process only lasts as long as the extracted bacteria are a useful resource for water remediation—their utility dictated by human needs.

There's also a humorously alarming moment at the top of the basins, when the tour group notices a flotation ring strapped to the handrail. The ring makes us all immediately imagine what it would mean to need to use its flotation capabilities—what it would mean to fall into these basins (especially the sludgy ones), each more than twice as deep as I am tall. This threat of bodily immersion, brought to my attention by the flotation ring, makes me consider how the subversion of inside/outside, of waste out of place,<sup>27</sup> makes me feel porous and vulnerable.

From here, the group descends to the tertiary stages of the water treatment process. The water is pumped through rows of cylindrical filters. It is in these tertiary stages that pathogens are removed from the water. Our tour guides note that, though El Estero does not treat their water to a quaternary stage, their three stages are rigorous enough that the water should be safe to drink. Part of the 2019 upgrades and rebranding was to "recycle" more of the treated water at El Estero (meaning it is used to water public spaces), instead of releasing all of it directly into the Pacific Ocean. El Estero's release of wastewater into the Pacific is linked to scientific ideas about dilution, and bodies of waters' ability to purify themselves. Theories of dilution are predicated on thresholds of harm that determine when something is considered polluted or polluting. They enforce a human/environmental hierarchy that imagines the human as separate from the ocean,

*while reinforcing the idea that the ocean does not need wastewater to be remediated to the same levels as is necessary for human use.<sup>28</sup>*

*Our tour did not include an up close encounter with El Estero's biogas electricity generation station (which provides about 70% of the center's electricity needs), though my group did get to spend a generous amount of time in the on-site water lab. The lab performs water quality analyses of drinking water, wastewater, and creek and ocean water. It is here that, with the help of a microscope and lab technician, my group encounters the bacteria and single-celled life present in the wastewater (including the now internet-famous water bear) in a mediated way that keeps the bacteria in their proper places, and our bodily interior/exterior binary safely in place.*

*Our tour ends with a trip to the bathrooms to wash our hands. As wastewater tourists, our tour guides ensure our cleanliness/hygiene is preserved, despite our immersion in this wastewater site. While scrubbing my hands along with the others, I think about the water spiraling down the drain—it rushes out of the tap clean and cool, but its contact with my contaminated hands makes it dirty. Despite being in the heart of the wastewater treatment facility, (waste)water infrastructure ensures my access to clean water, and the proper containment and circulation of dirty water to be treated. While I wait for everyone to return, the lush landscaping of the campus comes up, and my tour guides proudly inform the group that they irrigate and fertilize the grounds with water and fertilizer from their facilities—again showcasing the rich (and in this case verdant) multispecies worlds sustained by wastewater and the ways infrastructure systems configure environments and create ecologies.*

Sage's participation in the El Estero tour spotlights how infrastructure materializes cultural constructions and shapes local environments. Western epistemologies are shaped by binary, dichotomous thinking—dichotomies are, as Thomas King (of Cherokee descent) demonstrates in *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, "the elemental structure of Western society."<sup>29</sup> We argue that wastewater as theory/metaphor and practice/method requires a reconsideration of the knowledge produced by dichotomous thinking. While the work of environmental humanists and feminist and queer science and technology studies scholars, such as Donna Haraway's synthesis of natureculture<sup>30</sup> and Karen Barad's concept of entanglement,<sup>31</sup> provide theoretical genealogies for understanding how nature and culture are co-constitutive, thinking with wastewater draws attention to other dichotomies that contour how wastewater is culturally conceived, including cleanliness versus dirtiness, purity versus contamination, polluted versus remediated, and the ways wastewater infrastructures are imagined, such as background versus foreground, invisibility versus visibility, and containment/enclosure versus circulation, to name only a few.<sup>32</sup>

Infrastructures, according to Brian Larkin, “comprise the architecture for circulation, literally providing the undergirding of modern societies, and they generate the ambient environment of everyday life.”<sup>33</sup> Larkin’s conceptualization of infrastructure, as “ambient” and “undergirding,” reveals how infrastructure sustains the functionality of societies, while it is also regularly conceived of as existing in the background. This tension between background/ambient and essential/functional is key, we assert, to US infrastructures of wastewater and their relationship to hygiene.

Larkin connects infrastructures’ circulatory aims with Enlightenment conceptions of a world in motion, linking infrastructure, processes of world making, and Western epistemologies. Infrastructural circulation requires containment and control. Infrastructures of wastewater discreetly remove liquid waste from “clean” domestic, professional, and public spheres, transporting it out of sight and out of mind to designated waste sites (whether these are storage tanks or wastewater treatment facilities). Wastewater infrastructures offer up an imaginary of a world where waste, and thus contamination, is contained and controlled by treatment facilities (like El Estero) and storage pits (like Piney Point, with which we will conclude), thus designating waste sites as somehow distinct and isolable from their surrounding environments and communities.<sup>34</sup> As modeled by El Estero and Piney Point, the dichotomous clean/dirty or hygienic/contaminated imaginary of the US is predicated on this background circulation of waste—its removal from “clean” sites and its transportation elsewhere, to places imagined as separate and contaminable.<sup>35</sup> Sage’s tour of El Estero provided the opportunity for her,<sup>36</sup> and her fellow wastewater tourists,<sup>37</sup> to immerse themselves in one locally designated waste site, and to complicate some of this binary thinking.

## Hygiene Theater and Contaminated Imaginaries

The closing hygienic practices—vigorous handwashing—that conclude Sage’s tour of El Estero evoke the lived experience of the last two years of the coronavirus pandemic. As Sage’s tour evidences, images and imaginaries of wastewater make people squeamish, incite fears over waterborne disease, and require foregrounding infrastructures and embodiments that have long been sidelined. In truth, the infectious spread of shit and other viral bodies abuts residual phobias of cleanliness, that, especially with the rise of COVID-19, epitomize what has been popularly termed “hygiene theater.”<sup>38</sup> For Derek Thompson, hygiene theater, while muddling the public health message only to sow further pandemic fears, problematically redistributes resources away from systemic solutions in order to uphold deep cleaning and scrubbing of surfaces as paradigms of clean living that ultimately give way to a false sense of security. We extend Thomson’s assessment of “hygiene theater” to better account for how the performance of hygiene, cleanliness, and

purity rely on constructions of dirtiness and filth that reinforce structural power dynamics including racism, white supremacy, classism, homophobia, and ableism. Alexis Shotwell, for instance, observes that “the delineation of theoretical purity, purity of classification, is always imbricated with the forever-failing attempt to delineate material purity—of race, ability, sexuality, or increasingly, illness.”<sup>39</sup> The illusion of hygiene relies on what we call **the contaminated imaginary**. In other words, hygiene theater provides an aperture through which to visualize the cultural construction of the West’s clean/dirty binary, and the ways notions of contamination disrupt the purportedly stable notions of what constitutes cleanliness. Put simply, hygiene theater is the stage upon which contaminated imaginaries are performed.

Wastewater’s hygiene theater and contaminated imaginaries make evident how particular bodies and identities become culturally inscribed in notions of clean and unclean and thus render embodiments (outside of cis-het white supremacy) abject. Hygiene and cleanliness demarcate the boundaries of socially, politically, and morally acceptable forms of being. Purity’s purported whiteness is encoded in opposition to and upheld by social conceptions of dirtiness, including waste (bodily and otherwise), poverty, and viral contamination. We need not remind ourselves of the discriminatory rhetoric that associates queer, poor, and BIPOC bodies as dirty, non-hygienic/non-professional, or as surplus/detritus. If theater’s etymology signals an attention to behold or spectate, then we speak to the ways in which hygiene theater not only coalesces with viral fears of wastewater, but also demands that the bodies somehow “contaminated” by these viral agents perform filth, which we now locate within the COVID-19 global pandemic.

## Rectal Futures of COVID-19

As the contaminated imaginary suggests, COVID-19 has informed every aspect of life, production, and encounter in this new decade, and so too has wastewater become a phantom menace running parallel to widespread fears of contagion and communication. In August 2020, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) initiated the National Wastewater Surveillance System, which sought to track the spread of COVID-19 through the fecal matter of communities connected to municipal sewer systems, which accounts for roughly 80% of people living in the US. By the CDC’s admission, the goals of surveilling wastewater were neither curative nor predictive: “Sewage testing over time can provide trend data that can complement other surveillance data that informs public health decision making. However, at this time, it is not possible to reliably and accurately predict the number of infected individuals in a community based on sewage testing.”<sup>40</sup> Wastewater, in other words, upholds the state’s surveillance of bodies by accounting for remnants of bodily entanglements found in excrement. This surveillance system shows how wastewater,

COVID-19/virality, hygiene theater, and contaminated imaginaries are co-implicated and co-produced.

In early July 2020, with fears of yet another COVID-19 hotspot emerging because of a jingoistic holiday, the Los Angeles Department of Public Health (LADPH) disseminated a guide detailing the relationship between COVID-19 and sexual activity—a continuation of pamphlets circulated months earlier by the CDC, New York state, and the District of Columbia. The guide opens with a question, “But can I have sex [during the pandemic]?,” to which the answer is, “Sex is a normal human activity, and a way to have fun without leaving your home. However, it is important that during this pandemic you practice safer sex in new ways. Here are some tips for how to enjoy sex and to avoid spreading COVID-19.”<sup>41</sup>

The sex-positive pamphlet develops safe and enjoyable guidelines by which to exercise one’s sexuality in heightened times of stress and viral insurgencies. As is widely known, COVID-19 is spread through direct and indirect respiratory contact (i.e. talking, coughing, sneezing, etc.) in which an infected individual passes the virus to an uninfected individual through mucus membranes (i.e. eyes, ears, mouth, nose, rectum, etc.). The LADPH guidelines recommend against kissing, unprotected genital-to-genital sex and genital-to-anus sex, and notably, rimming, a form of oral sex that engages the anus.<sup>42</sup> The pamphlet reads, “Rimming (mouth on anus) might spread COVID-19. Virus in feces may enter your mouth.” Fears of coprophilia, coprophagia, contamination, and unhygienic practice explode in these two concise sentences. The fear of the anus supersedes the fear of viral fecal matter.

As the LADPH guidelines evidence, the fear of the anus returns in full force with the pronouncement of COVID-19. Leo Bersani’s foundational essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” locates anality as a site of queer annihilation because of the widespread contraction of HIV/AIDS among gay men, about whom Bersani emphatically writes.<sup>43</sup> “Is the Rectum a Grave” unfolds yet another strand of what we identify as hygiene theatre’s contaminated imaginary in that gay sex and the emergence of the HIV/AIDS pandemic are interwoven as sully the body, and with it, the cultures, locations, and institutions invirated bodies circulate among. To be clear, we are not interested in conflating COVID-19 and HIV/AIDS, especially because the latter has become a weapon by which to rationalize the ostracization and violation of queer bodies and bodies of color—the populations still most disproportionately affected by the virus. However, this has not stopped public-facing content, including both click-bait media and government-sponsored sources alike, from suggesting their similitude.<sup>44</sup>

Consider, for example, the CDC’s FAQ regarding COVID-19 and HIV, which explicitly addresses both viruses. In a failed attempt at destigmatizing COVID-19 and, potentially HIV, the CDC writes, “Because of limited data, we believe people with HIV who are on effective HIV treatment have the same risk for COVID-19 as people who do not have HIV.”<sup>45</sup>



The FAQ attempts to downplay the fact that individuals with HIV are more at risk of the long-term effects, including death, of COVID-19. This assertion directly contrasts studies cited by the CDC (in that limited data set) in which individuals with HIV **were more likely to die** of COVID-19—and these studies reflected cases across the globe, including South Africa, New York City, and the UK.<sup>46</sup> As these studies and the CDC note, and which informed the rollout of vaccination dissemination in most US states, individuals with comorbidities (such as hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, cancer, etc.) and immunocompromises are more likely to die from COVID-19 given the virus's immune system attacks. The CDC downplays the lived realities of those with HIV who—despite antiviral medications—remain at higher risk of the severe effects of COVID-19 variants. The failed attempt at stigma reduction runs the risk of falsely minimizing the potential risks of COVID-19 on immunocompromised individuals with HIV/AIDS who are, as we discuss below, disproportionately gay and bisexual men, as well as Black and Latinx people.

These same rhetorical strategies (and failures) reappear in the last question of the FAQ: “What can everyone do to minimize stigma about COVID-19?” The CDC’s response draws parallels between COVID-19 and HIV: “Minimizing stigma and misinformation about COVID-19 is very important. People with HIV have experience in dealing with stigma and can be allies in preventing COVID-19 stigma.” What’s especially strange about this exchange is that the question does not match the answer and vice versa. The question asks about “everyone” not exclusively those with HIV/AIDS, and the answer attempts to situate an unsettling camaraderie among those with COVID-19 and HIV/AIDS. Those with HIV/AIDS are called upon to be “allies” to COVID-19 positive people, as if to suggest that these populations are mutually exclusive. The CDC proposes that COVID-19 and HIV/AIDS are somehow linked and yet, in the same breath, encounter disparate yet likened stigmatization. Those with HIV/AIDS, as a result, must take up the emotional labor of situating allyship for all individuals with viral exposure. HIV/AIDS thus becomes the metonymic über-virus.

The juxtaposition of COVID-19 and HIV/AIDS invariably laminates sexuality and waste (a metaphoric body wasted away in addition), especially as they are synced with a toxic, infective anality.<sup>47</sup> If, in Bersani’s formative queer theorization, the anus becomes a site of possible erasure as a result of viral exposure, so too have COVID-19 rhetorics and science sought to locate the anus as the skeleton key for containment and surveillance.<sup>48</sup> For instance, a 2021 news report documented China’s use of anal swabs (in addition to nose and throat) to more effectively discern whether an individual was a host for COVID-19.<sup>49</sup> The anal swabs, which require a 1–2 inch cotton implement to be inserted directly into the anus and rotated much like nasal swabs, were employed for those traveling into and among major Chinese metropolises, especially those who exhibited or reported symptoms. While throat swabs often yielded negative results, the anal and nose swabs—in conjunction—are

ostensibly capable of more efficient and reliable data. Wendy Szymczak, a diagnostic researcher at New York's Montefiore Medical Center, clarifies the anal swabs' utility:

The main advantage of a stool PCR is that you can detect the SARS-CoV-2 RNA for a longer period of time, post-symptom onset. So, for the traditional nose and throat, or nasopharyngeal PCRs, you can detect virus usually for about two weeks if the patient has mild symptoms. Whereas in the stool, it's been shown that you can usually detect the virus for about four weeks, and for some patients even longer, out to 70 days.<sup>50</sup>

The problem, Szymczak observes, is that not all individuals shed RNA—the traceable entity that registers on these diagnostics—in fecal matter. Oftentimes, remnants of RNA found in solid waste are not transmissible forms of virus; feces can carry inert viral material that poses no additional risks because it is senescent.

Despite this realization, the microscopic surveilling view that gazes into the bowel/bowl suggests that the health and hygiene of a community hinge upon the readily available information that the anus can provide in terms of locating, tracking, and containing viral spread. The anality of COVID-19 continues to unfurl queer futures and theories, not only because of its associations with HIV/AIDS. Anality has long been central to queer theory—thus rectal swabs and the containment of bodies deemed unclean, virally-infected, and biohazardous threats position COVID-19 as yet another queer horizon. The rectal wastewater futures we see operating here thus accord what Neel Ahuja calls “atmospheric intimacy,” or a “signal that the reproductive forces and waste effects of carbon intensify contradictions between precarity and freedom, reforming the political through a model of action distinct from the agency of the human sovereign.”<sup>51</sup> Ahuja doesn't mean waste in the same way we do, but the joining of “waste effects” and its queer environmental focus are apposite here. Neither COVID-19 nor wastewater are queer in and of themselves, but in their cultural imaginary and realities they maintain queer affinities. These of course assume racialized connotations, especially for Asian and Pacific Islander communities, when—fanned by incendiary misinformation spread by a former presidential demagogue—COVID-19 was dysphemized as the “China virus,” which induced widespread Sinophobia and hate crimes across the US.

*These persist as we write this essay. I am keenly aware of the embodied realities of “waste effects.”<sup>52</sup> It reminds me too much of a (now staid) retort by homophobic people when they find out an attractive (cis, white, hetero-passing) person is queer: “What a waste.” The wastedness of such a remark unfurls unceasing commitments to repro-futurity in which the desired, now outed, individual bears all the potential of hetero-reproducibility and yet refuses to participate. They are a love object who stands outside of the realms of hetero-acceptability. “What a waste” is thus akin to accusations that queer people “choose” to be queer. While these semantically different*

*yet identical phrases may appear at odds, they signal forms of queer being that are a waste to/of hetero-reproductive systems.*

*Waste effects, I've learned, also participate in delineating socio-political acceptability in rural America. As a queer mixed-race person, I should be inured to navigating these dynamics. I'm not. I currently live in a deeply conservative county in Central Pennsylvania—voting data suggests that this county may be one of the most historically conservative in the nation<sup>53</sup>—and I am too familiar with the racialization of COVID-19 in the US, which pairs Asianness and virality.<sup>54</sup> In a county where mask mandates were loose, at best, I found myself in a double bind: the mask represented a trust in science and refusal to deny the reality of viral contamination, especially in indoor, public spaces such as grocery stores and libraries. And yet, without the mask (and other forms of disguise), my mixed Asian features are more prominent. The mask suggests a political alliance; my maskless face engenders a radical racial threat. The irony of this doesn't escape me, but neither does bald-faced racism. Both are met with vitriol and different threats of potential violence, especially here and places just like it around the globe. Waste effects take on renewed vigor in this context. Wasted, not as in inebriated, but a colloquial turn of phrase that defines a body laid out, unalive, because of brutal violence. These waste effects worry me most.*

To refurbish Bersani's evocative question, with the anality of COVID-19, the anus is not exclusively a grave—though high comorbidity rates continue that reading—it is also an investigative site for biopolitical control, especially of marginalized communities or those deemed "dirty." We need not be reminded that those populations hit hardest and made even more precarious by both HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 are queer and BIPOC.<sup>55</sup> Urban populations of color remain some of the most affected by COVID-19 spread; indeed, in places like Chicago and Los Angeles, wealthy, predominately white, suburban individuals sought (and obtained) vaccination appointments reserved for urban populations of color and frontline workers—even forcing one site to shut down all appointments.<sup>56</sup> According to 2020 statistics published by UNAIDS, roughly 40 million people currently live with HIV; 1.7 million contracted the virus in 2019. And while HIV contraction is down by 40% from its 1998 peak, HIV infections disproportionately affect young women in Africa; gay men (and men who have sex with men) are 26 times more likely to contract HIV; and sex workers are 30 times more likely.<sup>57</sup> In the US, 1 in 7 individuals lives with HIV, and Black and Latinx populations record the highest contraction rates. For example, as of 2018, while Black populations account for only 13% of all Americans, 41% of those with HIV identify as Black; for Latinx populations these percentages are 18 and 23, respectively.<sup>58</sup> And gay and bisexual men, as well as men who have sex with men, account for 70% of new HIV infections in the US.<sup>59</sup>

These disproportionate statistics reveal how viral contaminants remain uneven realities for already precarious and marginalized populations. The epistemological connection that HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 share then is not just predicated on facile presumptions that all viruses operate identically. Rather, the rectal futures of COVID-19 realize a connection with HIV/AIDS discourses precisely because of the disenfranchisement that both pandemics spur in queer and BIPOC communities.

## The Anthropocene's Shitty Conclusions

As we neared completing this essay, we found ourselves further mired in streams of wastewater. Wastewater was everywhere we looked and in many places we hadn't. In early April 2021, Piney Point, a wastewater processing plant in Manatee County, Florida, reported catastrophic infrastructural failures that resulted in uncontrolled seepage to the broader community.<sup>60</sup> Evacuations were ordered for several hundred nearby residents, though not ordered for the residents at the Manatee County Jail (a small number were to be moved to an "upper campus"), which houses more than one thousand inmates and lies within the evacuation zone—roughly a half-mile radius of the wastewater breach.<sup>61</sup> Piney Point lays bare the ways that environmental degradation exacerbates human systems of unfreedom including those imposed by the carceral state.<sup>62</sup> Ne'er-do-well Governor Ron DeSantis declared the Piney Point leak a state of emergency because of the threat of radioactive spread stemming from phosphogypsum, a byproduct of fertilizer production. Phosphogypsum is a crystallized concentration of "naturally-occurring uranium, thorium, and radium," which has a long-documented history of polluting groundwater.<sup>63</sup> Piney Point models what Rob Nixon identifies as the tension between environmental slow violence (the decades-long everyday leaching of Piney Point) and spectacular violence (the infrastructural failure).<sup>64</sup>

In a letter to DeSantis, Commissioner of Agriculture, Nicole Fried, reminds the governor that the failure of wastewater infrastructure at Piney Point has been ongoing for more than two decades.<sup>65</sup> The Department of Agriculture has for half a century documented the failings of this infrastructure resulting from mismanaged mining in Central Florida. The effects have included widespread environmental disaster and unmeasured wastewater leachate and radioactive waste seepage into soil and bodies of water. Piney Point's 2021 failures exemplify how, too often, recognizing something as violence requires the spectacular.



< [https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/49587240523\\_0b55e0e70f\\_o-Jeremy-Chow.jpg](https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/49587240523_0b55e0e70f_o-Jeremy-Chow.jpg) >

Figure 3. A 2020 visit to TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Courtesy of IAEA Photobank (CC BY 2.0).

Some 7,300 miles away, and in the same month, the Japanese government approved the release of 1.2 million tons of radioactive wastewater in the Pacific Ocean as a means of dealing with the contaminated water from the 2011 Fukushima reactor explosion. Despite protests from Japan's fishing industry and trading partners China and South Korea, as well as a call to arms by environmental organizations like Greenpeace, Japan plans to release this wastewater into the Pacific for the next forty years. The decades it will take for all the stored wastewater to be released, as well as the long duration of radioactivity which exceeds human timescales, raise questions about the temporalities of waste and the (slow violence) afterlives of contamination. Reports indicate that Japanese officials have assured all parties that the radioactivity of the wastewater will be beneath the radiation levels currently set for potable water—at least based on the standards of the International Atomic Energy Agency. While we have worked to think with wastewater's streams and circulation throughout this essay, we also want to draw attention to the chokepoint, or blockage, of water's flow at the Fukushima Campus, where more than a thousand tanks currently contain the irradiated water, keeping it from circulating through the Pacific. A photograph of TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant (Figure 3) documents some of this infrastructure. However, the amount of wastewater that needs storing continues to increase, as water must be pumped through the debris to keep it from causing further

damage, resulting in contaminated water that exceeds human ability to contain. The measured effects of releasing the wastewater are meant to minimize the threats to humans, though those who oppose the decision worry that little concern has been paid to the aquatic life and environments that will be forced to stomach the polluted wastewater.<sup>66</sup> Once released, the wastewater will eventually flow across the Pacific, the ocean's currents bringing this essay full circle, back to California's coast.

## Jeremy's Conclusion

*Wastewater is polemical. And the conclusions I see for wastewater's imbrication in the Anthropocene are admittedly pessimistic—a stark contrast to the hopeful ambivalence offered by Sage. To echo Susan Signe Morrison, "Our entanglements with waste, whether Amazon packaging or food leftovers, leaves little hope for positive thinking."<sup>67</sup>*

*I read these global scenes—that of Piney Points and Fukushima—as illustrations of hygiene theater's final act. That is, the widespread dissemination of wastewater into the world's oceans, which invariably institutes problems for all species at various scales (microbes to megafauna) demonstrating what Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls empire's constitutive nature with waste construction and distribution.<sup>68</sup> "To turn to figures of waste," DeLoughrey writes, "is to examine the spatial collapse between the human and nonhuman nature, and to render visible some of the most pernicious and mystified by-products of late capitalism and regimes of state disposability."<sup>69</sup> The Anthropocene would seem then to cloud these visibilities and to likewise enable the agents responsible for the mass dissemination of waste to avoid culpability. Waste, like the Anthropocene, indexes both material reality and theoretical apparatus so as to similarly reinforce an insidious homogeneity. Waste thus operates as an epistemological analogue to the Anthropocene in that both are facily recognized as affecting all humans and nonhumans alike. The logic goes as follows: we are all equally responsible for the waste and all equally damaged by this wasting. We know this rhetorical homogeneity to be patently false. There are textures to the damages enacted by*

## Sage's Conclusion

*While Jeremy and I reach many of the same conclusions—including a discomfort with the Anthropocene's reductive flattening of human history and hierarchies of power, as well as a deep investment in challenging harmful cultural constructions of purity and contamination—we end up in very different places affectively. Jeremy is an avowed pessimist, whereas in my search for additional possibilities, I end in a more hopefully ambivalent place. I am committed to dismantling and retooling the Western binary formations of nature and culture; cleanliness and dirtiness; hygiene and contamination that contour human relations with each other and the more-than-human world. Wastewater infrastructures create a world built on the myth of control and containment, enabling the globally powerful and privileged to participate in a hygiene theatrics shaped by cultural constructions of cleanliness that imagine some communities, sites, and bodies of water as justifiably contaminable and others as always already contaminating. Jeremy reads a theoretically emancipatory possibility in reclaiming ruination, which I also understand to be a powerful intervention in cultural constructions of purity. I worry, however, that relishing a world of waste may not, in fact, open up new possibilities for being in the world outside of the cultural and environmental wreckage of the West's dichotomous worldmaking.*

*I recognize that the scale and breadth of contamination, accumulation, and entanglement render the imaginary of isolable waste sites false. However, I also remain committed to the possibilities of remediation: it is the water treatment processing at sites like El Estero, after all, that protect communities from waterborne diseases, which are still one of the global leading causes of death, killing millions each year worldwide. Where Jeremy transgressively recuperates filth, I hope to*



waste and the Anthropocene that reinforce and highlight particular precarities, especially for already marginalized and racialized communities and geographies.

The deployment of waste as a form of planetary neocolonialism ironically demonstrates hygiene theater's erasure. While Thompson uses the phrase to identify the persistent and insistent visuals of hypercleaning, hygiene theater's final act recognizes its moot nature. There is no more hygiene theater in the Anthropocene because there is no longer any attempt to clean up the mess that waste has wrought. When we pass a point of no return, when the contamination of viral, infectious, and other "unclean" bodies has reached critical mass, we also eliminate the need for hygiene theatrics. The purification of remediation is no longer possible. Let's give up the ghost.

Wastewater methodologies and ontologies seek to live in the wastes that we have ushered in—an opportunity that makes possible new forms of relationality, scale, and paradigms of purity. I wager, then, the following: Let us make a home in our ruination—a prospect that has long lived within queer and queer of color discourses. I invite others to dwell with us in the inescapable sullied filth, waste, and environments that have become a hallmark of the Anthropocene, offering new wastewater ontologies that relish our inhabitation of waste in Anthropocene presents and futures. To butcher a provocation from Bruno Latour that has already been butchered many times over: **we have never been clean.** The Anthropocene's shitty futures enable a necessary re-visioning in which we understand waste and wastewater to restructure and re-suture all hierarchies, planes, and levels of the environmental mesh in which we find ourselves.

reimagine remediation as an act of being in reciprocal relationship to human and more-than-human worlds.

Rejecting the colonialism of waste and the structures of power that create disasters like Piney Point, for me, requires a rebuilding rooted in responsibility to and care for the human and more-than-human beings (already) living in the "wasted" worlds of justified contamination—and remediation can, perhaps, be one facet of this responsibility and care. My turn to care is not uncomplicated, unproblematized, or even necessarily prescriptive. Puig De La Bellacasa's work thickens my notions of "care as a noninnocent but necessary ethos of always situated implications."<sup>70</sup>

Max Liboiron (Michif-settler) contends that pollution is colonialism, in part, because it enables colonial land relations. Liboiron also traces how colonial environmentalists who attempt to mitigate and/or remediate pollution can (and often do) also enact colonial land relations as their environmental efforts continue to occupy and make available Indigenous land to settler colonists.<sup>71</sup> Liboiron powerfully demonstrates the incommensurabilities between colonial environmentalisms and Indigenous relations with Turtle Island's lands and waters, while also highlighting the inability of non-decolonial environmentalisms to address issues of Native sovereignty and self-determination. Liboiron's work contributes to my ambivalence about remediation,<sup>72</sup> while underscoring the need to reimagine care, being, and responsibility in ways that do not assume settler access to and control of Indigenous land relations.

Wastewater requires a continued commitment to complexity and unevenness—as its multiple suturings exceed the dichotomous structures of Western thought. While the inverse of clean is transgressive, and transgression is powerful, embracing a world shaped by the inversion of cleanliness is still structured by dichotomy. Ultimately, it still ends with a

*wasted world. The wastewater streams we navigate here showcase the possibility for multi-scalar multispecies entanglements and co-constitutive understandings of culture and nature. These entanglements require an understanding of waste as not discrete, contamination as not separable—and this, in turn, demands accountability, reciprocity, and care.*

We have sought here to visualize the broad and diverse extent by which wastewater participates in shaping human, nonhuman, and-more-than human worlds—as well as those individuals within that trifold who are cast outside or beyond those taxonomic boundaries. For example, humans whose viral infections are used to dehumanize them as well as the nonhuman or more-than-human microbial contaminants that become humanized through embodied introduction. This essay demonstrates the various socio-cultural constructions that accompany any discussion of waste, water, and their joining, and attends to a concerted effort to waste notions of (never possible) purity and the theatrics of hygiene. While waste is commonly associated with detritus or excess, we ask for a reconsideration of what dwells in those realms of dross because, as we have shown, they can unlock variegated histories, stories, and identity-based representations that are too rich to be flushed.

## Notes

1. Mielle Chandler and Astrida Neimanis, "Water and Gestationality: What Flows Beneath Ethics," in *Thinking with Water*, ed. Cecilia Chen (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 61. ↩
2. Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, "Introduction: Toward a Hydrological Turn?," in Chen, *Thinking with Water*, 4. ↩
3. Myra Hird, "The Phenomenon of Waste-World-Making," *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* 30 (2016): 2, <https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/030.e15> <  
<https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/030.e15>>. ↩
4. Hird, "The Phenomenon of Waste-World-Making," 2. ↩
5. Sarah A. Moore, "Garbage Matters: Concepts in New Geographies of Waste," *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 12 (2012): 780–799, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512437077> <  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512437077>>. ↩
6. Myra Hird, "Knowing Waste: Towards an Inhuman Epistemology," *Social Epistemology* 26, no. 3–4 (2012): 157–173, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2012.727195> <  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2012.727195>>. ↩
7. Our understanding of wastewater as media is informed by elemental media studies, which conceives of the elements as "not a neutral background, but lively forces that shape culture, politics, and communication." Melody Jue and Rafico Ruiz, *Saturation: An Elemental Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 1. ↩

8. Cecilia Chen, "Mapping Waters: Thinking with Watery Places," *Thinking with Water* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 275. ↵
9. Chen, "Mapping Waters: Thinking with Watery Places," 275. ↵
10. Chen, "Mapping Waters: Thinking with Watery Places," 275. ↵
11. Sage took a tour of El Estero in 2020 with a group of scholars and community members. *A huge thanks to Melody Jue and Somak Mukherjee for organizing the tour as part of UCSB's Literature and Environment Research Initiative! I dedicate my reflection on the experience to you both. Thank you!* ↵
12. Chen, "Mapping Waters: Thinking with Watery Places," 275. ↵
13. For more on the ways that climate change and the Anthropocene intensify colonialism, see Kyle Powys Whyte (Potawatomi). Kyle Powys Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *English Language Notes* 55, no. 1–2 (2017): 153–162, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-55.1-2.153> < <https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-55.1-2.153> > . ↵
14. For more on the assumptions built into "we," see Max Liboiron's *Pollution is Colonialism*, especially 23–25. Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021). ↵
15. The formal aspects of this article are deliberate. We employ **bold** to signify emphasis. We use *italics* with indentation in the body text to indicate first-hand experiences. ↵
16. Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis, "Introduction: Toward a Hydrological Turn?," 19. ↵
17. Philip Steinberg, "Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions," *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2013): 156–169, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2013.785192> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2013.785192> > . ↵
18. Our understanding of our curatorial work in this essay as one of its queer methodological commitments stems from Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez's introduction to ASAP's special issue on queer form—"Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social"—in which they posit that "An analytical strategy that seems to have pride of place in queer cultural studies is the intuitive combination of seemingly disparate objects whose connections emerge through the critic's idiosyncratic style of rhetorical and archival disclosure" (230). In their introduction to the issue, the three give "scholars license to think together concepts and works of art that might appear inconsonant according to strictures of historical period, genre, medium, or perceived cultural context, but whose relevance and discursive imbrication become visible through the activity of the queer critic, whose expressed desires or politics then have space to become heuristic starting points" (230). Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez, "Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social," *ASAP* 2, no. 2 (2017): 227–239, <http://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2017.0031> < <http://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2017.0031> > . ↵
19. For more on Santa Barbara's role in petromodernity, the environmental consequences of the 1969 Unocal oil spill, and how thinking regionally is a generative approach to engaging with global energy and infrastructure systems, see Stephanie LeMenager. Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://www.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899425.001.0001> < <https://www.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899425.001.0001> > . ↵
20. "El Estero Water Resource Center," City of Santa Barbara, last modified January 29, 2021, <https://www.santabarbaraca.gov/gov/depts/pw/resources/wastewater/estero.asp> < <https://www.santabarbaraca.gov/gov/depts/pw/resources/wastewater/estero.asp> > . ↵
21. Gómez-Barris conceives of the "submerged perspective" as a decolonial femme methodology. Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 1. It is important to note here that, while we are inspired by Gómez-Barris' "submerged perspective," we do not make claims to doing decolonial work in this article, as our understanding of decolonization, shaped by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, is that decolonial efforts must spatially and materially fuel Indigenous self determination

- and enable Indigenous land relations. Our essay, while attempting to think alongside, listen to, and learn from Indigenous critiques of colonialism's environmental violence and extraction, and Native ways of being part of and in relation to the environment, does not return stolen land to its Indigenous inhabitants. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1.1 (2012): 1-40. <https://doi.org/10.25058/20112742.n38.04> < <https://doi.org/10.25058/20112742.n38.04>> . For an in-depth discussion of the differences between anticolonialism and decolonialism, and the nuances between Western epistemologies and colonialism, see Liboiron. Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, 26–27. ↵
22. Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone*, xiii–xiv. ↵
  23. *I borrow the language of "interest" and "concern" from Parks' critical humanities methodology.* See note 36 below for more on Parks' critical humanities methodology for studying infrastructure. Parks, "Stuff You Can Kick," 355–356. ↵
  24. *While my experience touring El Estero was not a toxic tour, Phaedra C. Pezzullo's writing about her own embodied participation in toxic tours is useful here as the tour of El Estero is an act of tourism from within a designated waste site—a site that makes clear the entanglements of nature, culture, performance, and community.* According to Pezzullo, tours focused on environmental justice issues have the capability of combining both cultural and environmental tourism, and are ultimately, cultural performances that produce community history and memory. See notes 35 and 37 below for more on Pezzullo's work. Phaedra C. Pezzullo, "Touring 'Cancer Alley,' Louisiana: Performances of Community and Memory for Environmental Justice," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2003): 226–252. ↵
  25. Jue asserts that submersion in the ocean denaturalizes Western habits of thought and perception. Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 19. ↵
  26. Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 19–20. ↵
  27. *Here I reference Douglas.* Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966). See note 32 below for more on Douglas's formulation of dirt as matter out of place. ↵
  28. For a science and technology studies take on the science of dilution and the 1969 oil spill, see Teresa Sabol Spezio, *Slick Policy: Environmental and Science Policy in the Aftermath of the Santa Barbara Oil Spill* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018). For more on the colonial assumptions of determining pollution see Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, 3–10. ↵
  29. Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 25. ↵
  30. Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003). ↵
  31. Barad defines entanglement as the "lack of an independent, self-contained existence," to demonstrate the ways "existence is not an individual affair ... rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating" (xi). We are, Barad stresses, "part of the nature that we seek to understand" (67). Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). ↵
  32. Famously blurring the boundaries of hygiene and the clean/dirty binary in the process, Mary Douglas theorizes dirt as "matter out of place." Douglas, *Purity and Danger*. Janet Walker further explicates, "The idea of dirt is relative, she {Douglas} explains: 'Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining table' . . . Further, it is no more dirty to dump garbage in Manhattan than it is to dump it in a landfill on Staten Island, or release it to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch—though our polluting mores may deem it so. This sort of shift in matter would contradict the normative positionality and visibility of dirt." Janet Walker, "Afterword: Climate Change as 'Matter out of Phase.'" *Saturation: An Elemental Politics*, eds. Melody Jue and Rafico Ruiz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 306–307. ↵
  33. Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2013): 327–343, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522> <

34. In July 2021, members of the US House of Representatives introduced HR 4099, a bill that seeks to remedy ongoing drought conditions in California and other Western states by instituting infrastructures that would extract potable water from wastewater. The cost is estimated at \$750 million. ↩
35. We build our thinking about hygiene theater and contaminated imaginaries, particularly in regard to designated waste sites, from Pezzullo's work on toxicity. Pezzullo writes that "the creation of these 'separate areas of existence' enables our culture more readily to dismiss the costs of toxic pollution because the waste and the people most affected by the waste appear hidden within their proper place" (5). Citing Robert R. Higgins, Pezzullo argues that waste sites are "deemed culturally to be 'appropriately polluted spaces,' such as neighborhoods of people of color and low-income communities," demonstrating the racialized lines cultural constructions of cleanliness falls along (5). Phaedra Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007). ↩
36. Taking up a humanities-based approach to the study of infrastructure, we also conceive of Sage's participation in the tour as following in the footsteps of Lisa Parks, who outlines a critical humanities methodology for studying infrastructure. Parks explains:

I have tried to develop a critical methodology for analyzing the significance of specific infrastructural sites and objects in relation to surrounding environmental, socio-economic, and geopolitical conditions. This critical methodology involved site visits and physical investigations of infrastructural objects, using personal observation, photography, maps, video, art, drawings, and other visualizations. These observations and mediations are intended to foster infrastructural intelligibility into discrete parts and framing them as objects of curiosity, investigation, and/or concern.

Lisa Parks, "Stuff You Can Kick: Toward a Theory of Media Infrastructures," *Between Humanities and the Digital*, ed. Patrik Svensson and David Theo Goldberg (Boston: MIT Press, 2015), 355–373. ↩
37. Pezzullo outlines at length the myriad problematic perceptions and structural issues surrounding tourism, while reserving the possibility that "practices of tourism may be motivated by our more admirable desires for fun, connection, difference, civic spirit, social and environmental change, and education." Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism*, 3. *It is these later drivers, environment, education, and connection, that shape my experience as a wastewater tourist.* ↩
38. Derek Thompson, "Hygiene Theater is a Huge Waste of Time," *Atlantic*, July 27, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/scourge-hygiene-theater/614599/> < <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/scourge-hygiene-theater/614599/>> . ↩
39. Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 4. ↩
40. CDC, "National Wastewater Surveillance System," March 19, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/wastewater-surveillance.html> < <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/wastewater-surveillance.html>> . ↩
41. Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, "COVID-19," January 11, 2021, <http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/media/Coronavirus/docs/people/GuidanceSex.pdf> < <http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/media/Coronavirus/docs/people/GuidanceSex.pdf>> . ↩
42. These guidelines would seem to disallow any form of sexual contact; this is not the case. For example, the province of British Columbia encouraged the use of "glory holes," which provides a potentially safer, contactless mode of sexual engagement. They suggest that individuals should "use barriers, like walls (e.g., glory holes), that allow for sexual contact but prevent close face-to-face contact." Concerns over fecal contamination remain though, even with barriers like glory holes. <https://web.archive.org/web/20200710013558/http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/prevention-risks/covid-19-and-sex> <

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200710013558/http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/prevention-risks/covid-19-and-sex> . ↵

43. Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). ↵
44. In late June 2021, Moderna—one of the three pharmaceutical companies with FDA approval for a COVID-19 vaccination—announced that it would use the same mRNA technologies to further trial an HIV vaccine. Indeed, the groundwork for the COVID-19 vaccination was predicated on ongoing research that had, before the pandemic, focused on HIV. Claire Wolters, “Moderna to Trial HIV and Flu Vaccines With mRNA Technology,” VeryWell Health, accessed July 9, 2021, <https://www.verywellhealth.com/moderna-to-trial-hiv-and-flu-vaccines-5189912> < <https://www.verywellhealth.com/moderna-to-trial-hiv-and-flu-vaccines-5189912> > . ↵
45. CDC, “COVID-19 and HIV,” October 20, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/covid-19.html> < <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/covid-19.html> > . ↵
46. See, for example, Western Cape Department of Health, “Risk Factors for Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Death in a Population Cohort Study from the Western Cape Province, South Africa,” *Clinical Infectious Diseases* (2020): 1–11; H. Miyashita and T. Kuno, “Prognosis of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Patients with HIV infection in New York City” *HIV Medicine* 22 (2021): e1–e2. ↵
47. See Zygmunt Bauman for an additional reading of “wasted lives,” which for Bauman include the indigent and stateless. Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). ↵
48. On surveillance societies, see, for example, David Lyon, Simone Browne, and Christina Sharpe. David Lyon, *Surveillance Society: Monitoring Everyday Life* (London: Open University Press, 2001); Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Christina Sharpe, *Into the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). ↵
49. Reuters Staff, “Chinese Cities Using Anal Swabs to Screen COVID-19 Infections,” *Reuters*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-testing/chinese-cities-using-anal-swabs-to-screen-covid-19-infections-idUSKBN29W1RN> < <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-testing/chinese-cities-using-anal-swabs-to-screen-covid-19-infections-idUSKBN29W1RN> > . ↵
50. Gabriel Borrud and Conor Dillon, “Anal COVID-19 Swabs in China —‘We just don’t know if it’s necessary,’” *DW*, May 3, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/anal-covid-19-swabs-in-china-we-just-dont-know-if-its-necessary/a-56789975> < <https://www.dw.com/en/anal-covid-19-swabs-in-china-we-just-dont-know-if-its-necessary/a-56789975> > ↵
51. Neel Ahuja, “Intimate Atmospheres: Queer Theory in a Time of Extinctions,” *GLQ* 21, no. 2–3 (2015): 367, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2843227> < <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2843227> > . ↵
52. *The “I” writing here is Jeremy.* ↵
53. John Peeler, “Bedrock: Genesis and Evolution of a Republican Bastion, Union County, Pennsylvania,” presentation, Bucknell Faculty Colloquium, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, April 1, 2013, [https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac\\_coll/8/](https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac_coll/8/) < [https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac\\_coll/8/](https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/fac_coll/8/) > . ↵
54. *Other forms of Sinophobia that operate widely among gay male circles, under the guise of preference (i.e. discriminatory slogans such as “No Fats, No Fems, No Blacks, No Asians”), are known to me, though space here limits further reflection.* ↵
55. See Ahuja for an incisive overview of how populations of color bore the early brunt of COVID-19 infections on Long Island, which established forms of “herd immunity” that ultimately benefited white populations and thus incited anti-mask and anti-vaccination vitriol precisely because the viral effects experienced by white populations were less intense than those faced by Black and Latinx populations. Neel Ahuja, “Herd Racialization and the Inequalities of Immunity,” *American Quarterly*, forthcoming. ↵

56. Rachel Brown, "Pasadena Cancels COVID-19 Vaccine Clinic after Hundreds of Ineligible People Make Appointments," *ABC 7 News*, March 9, 2021, <https://abc7.com/pasadena-vaccine-clinic-canceled-line-jumpers-california-coronavirus/10400675/> < <https://abc7.com/pasadena-vaccine-clinic-canceled-line-jumpers-california-coronavirus/10400675/> > . ↵
57. UNAIDS, "Global HIV & AIDS statistics — 2020 fact sheet," 2021, <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet> < <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet> > . ↵
58. See Cathy Cohen for an extended discussion of Blackness and AIDS. Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). ↵
59. HIV.gov, "US Statistics," 2021, <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/data-and-trends/statistics> < <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/data-and-trends/statistics> > . ↵
60. Additional infrastructural ruptures were reported in January 2022 too. ↵
61. Li Cohen, "Toxic Wastewater Reservoir on Verge of Collapse in Florida Could Cause 'Catastrophic Event,'" *CBS News*, April 6, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/florida-state-of-emergency-wastewater-leak-verge-catastrophe/> < <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/florida-state-of-emergency-wastewater-leak-verge-catastrophe/> > . ↵
62. For more on the ways that prisons are sites of environmental injustice, and how prison abolition is an environmental justice issue, see David Pellow. David Pellow, *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* (New York: Polity, 2017). ↵
63. EPA, "Radioactive Material From Fertilizer Production," December 2, 2020, <https://www.epa.gov/radtown/radioactive-material-fertilizer-production> < <https://www.epa.gov/radtown/radioactive-material-fertilizer-production> > . ↵
64. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). ↵
65. Nikki Fried (NikkiFriedFL), "I have requested that @GovRonDeSantis convene an emergency meeting of the Florida Cabinet for a briefing by @FLDEPNews Secretary @NoahValenstein," Twitter image, April 3, 2021, 2:21 PM. <https://twitter.com/NikkiFriedFL/status/1378410018760953858> < <https://twitter.com/NikkiFriedFL/status/1378410018760953858> > . ↵
66. BBC News, "Fukushima: Japan Approves Releasing Wastewater into Ocean," April 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56728068> < <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56728068> > . ↵
67. Morrison likewise addresses the various timescales that impact waste and vice versa, especially in light of the Anthropocene's correspondence with the "fecocene." Susan Signe Morrison, "Waste," *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Stephanie Foote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 231. ↵
68. Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 102. ↵
69. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, 101. ↵
70. Puig De La Bellacasa further explains "that an ethical reorganization of human-nonhuman relations is vital, but what this means in terms of caring obligations that could enact nonexploitative forms of togetherness cannot be imagined once for all." María Puig De La Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 24. ↵
71. Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*. ↵
72. *I own up to my ambivalence thanks to Nicole Seymour's focus on ambivalence in Bad Environmentalism, which embraces "the contradictions, complications, and ambivalences of environmental humanities scholarship," and María Puig De La Bellacasa use of ambivalence to*



critique “the generic notion of care,” explaining that her project’s “ambivalences deepened without diminishing the urge to keep practices of care within our thinking spectrum when seeking ways of living together as well as possible.” Nicole Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 28. Puig De La Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 24. ↩

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## Author Information

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## Satisfaction Guaranteed: Techno-Orientalism in Vaporwave

by Lucy March | Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

**ABSTRACT** A characteristic frequently glossed over in scholarly examinations of the online electronic music genre vaporwave is its use of East Asian cultural imagery in its paratexts. One exception is a piece by musicologist Ken McLeod, who connects vaporwave's use of visual references to Japanese culture to techno-Orientalism, a term that describes how paranoia around Japanese economic expansion in the late twentieth century manifested in American and European cultural products. This article extends McLeod's argument to show how the uses and reproductions of East Asian cultural elements in vaporwave serve to reinforce stereotypes consistent with histories of techno-Orientalist representations, particularly with regard to gender. This article elaborates on the anonymous nature of the vaporwave scene to complicate approaches to techno-Orientalist analyses of digital artifacts. In doing so, this essay contributes to the growing body of scholarly literature addressing the roles representation, aesthetics, and affect play in the formation of communities around music genres online.

**KEYWORDS** gender, music, nostalgia, vaporwave, techno-Orientalism, pleasure

*[Editors' note: Accompanying this article is a playlist < <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0F64CXGBfYRUZ6URQnOYMSEhXGmr3VhZ>> that provides multimedia context with the article. You are invited to watch/listen while reading.]*

In December 2012, musicologist and critic Adam Harper published an article in the online music criticism magazine *Dummy* titled "Vaporwave and the Pop-Art of the Virtual Plaza," in which he emphasizes the contradictory role of this newer genre of electronic music in relation to corporate-sponsored globalization. Is vaporwave "a critique of capitalism or a capitulation to it?" Harper asks. His answer: "Both and neither."<sup>1</sup> Posts on the subreddit r/vaporwave, the most active subforum on Reddit dedicated to the genre, point to the continued influence of this essay. One user asked "Is 'capitalist dystopia' really a vaporwave theme or was this just a figment of Adam Harper's imagination?" The question led to a rich discussion in the comments section on the merits and drawbacks of this interpretation of vaporwave's cultural moment.<sup>2</sup> Despite the continued influence of

vaporwave on popular music trends, other critical aspects of the genre have neglected to receive the same attention from vaporwave fans and observers.

One aspect of vaporwave that is glossed over in the literature on the genre is the East Asian (primarily Japanese, but including Korean and Chinese) cultural imagery and text that saturates this music. Despite the frequency of these elements in vaporwave's paratexts (what Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth describe as "the maelstrom of online images, GIFs, videos, and interactive media that constitute vaporwave's 'interface aesthetic'"<sup>3</sup>) the implications of their presence on understandings of these cultural environments have been critically neglected by scholars. One exception is a piece by musicologist Ken McLeod, who finds a direct connection between vaporwave's use of East Asian visual references and techno-Orientalism,<sup>4</sup> a term that describes how paranoia around Japanese economic expansion in the late twentieth century manifested in American and European cultural products.<sup>5</sup> For McLeod, the prevalence of these elements elicits notions of Japan's technology-driven prosperity and fosters stereotypical ideas about the country as a land of consumerism and robotics.<sup>6</sup> Through a qualitative analysis of its texts and paratexts, this essay extends McLeod's observations to show how vaporwave reimagines techno-Orientalism by tapping into feelings of pleasure associated with nostalgic East Asian consumer culture, primarily through its evocation of gender-based stereotypes. Moreover, it will elaborate upon the anonymous nature of the vaporwave scene that McLeod recognizes to complicate approaches to techno-Orientalist analyses of digital artifacts. In doing so, this essay contributes to the growing body of scholarly literature addressing the roles of representation, aesthetics, and affect play in the formation of communities around music genres online.<sup>7</sup>

## Vaporwave: Music for the Extremely Online

Equal parts music genre and Internet meme, vaporwave was born in the early 2010s from equally eclectic microgenres like chillwave and witch house.<sup>8</sup> While the genre contains a great deal of musical variety, including numerous offshoots like mallsoft and vaportrap, the general formula for a vaporwave track remains as Andrew Whelan and Raphaël Nowak describe it: the "slowing down and looping [of] ostensibly 'kitsch' or 'schmaltzy' music from the 1980s and 1990s" like corporate Muzak and R&B.<sup>9</sup> Enhancing the kitsch are vaporwave's eclectic visual aspects, which are considered equally as important as the music in characterizing this genre: screenshots from obscure 1990s anime series, footage of abandoned malls, or old logos from software like Windows 95 and gaming companies like Atari serve to design the world of imagined consumer nostalgia that surrounds this music. Since its emergence, vaporwave has seeped into mainstream culture in various ways, including through a collaboration between Arizona Tea and Adidas to produce

sneakers covered with the iconic turquoise-and-cherry blossom print which provided aesthetic inspiration for vaportrap artist Yung Lean's 2013 music video "Hurt." The sensation and subsequent mob resulting from the pop-up release of the sneakers in Lower Manhattan led to the intervention of the NYPD.<sup>10</sup>

Yung Lean's 2013 music video for *Hurt*, which employs vaporwave-inspired aesthetics. This video is included in the playlist on the bottom right of this page.

Vaporwave's reliance on digital spaces for its birth and its continued evolution, resulting in its characterization as an "Internet genre," holds implications for questions around identity and representation in this music.<sup>11</sup> Harper describes "digital maximalism," the sense of information overload or saturation that is embodied in the very essence of the Internet, as one characteristic of Internet genres like vaporwave. Indeed, vaporwave seems to capture the excitement and anxiety of being extremely online. Even in its early to mid-2010s heyday, live vaporwave shows or physical album releases were rare, and vaporwave fans who wanted to participate in the genre did so primarily through engagement in online spaces.<sup>12</sup> By sharing vaporwave tracks through Tumblr and Bandcamp pages and websites for small net-based music labels, listeners and creators alike create musical imagined communities and simultaneously facilitate further participation in online activities around the genre through the promotion of vaporwave's aesthetic. At the same time, vaporwave's online and DIY nature lead to a blurring of lines between creator and listener and the formation of a largely anonymous community, which necessitates a reexamination of the traditional lenses of power dynamics through which many analyses of cultural appropriation are conducted, given that the identities of producers are often not easily identifiable.

As Whelan and Nowak observe, “vaporwave is used as a vehicle to invoke and narrate capitalism,” and “a particular construction of capitalism is thereby communicated to those who engage with these accounts” of the genre.<sup>13</sup> One of the most common tools for this construction is nostalgia, which is key to vaporwave’s affective power: it offers digital “archaism within a contemporary frame,” harkening back to the earliest days of the Internet both musically and aesthetically.<sup>14</sup> Feelings of nostalgia are also central to vaporwave’s evocation of East Asian consumer culture. Alican Koc argues that the use of Japanese text and anime characters, coupled with representations of consumer commodities such as cans of Arizona green tea adorned with cherry blossoms, is characteristic of a “melancholic nostalgia . . . created through an aestheticization of the feelings of estrangement produced by the salient characteristics of late capitalism.”<sup>15</sup> At the same time, such uses of nostalgic elements can also elicit feelings of pleasure in the listener, or what Glitsos refers to as vaporwave’s “memory play.”<sup>16</sup> This essay considers these nostalgic pleasures as one way in which vaporwave expands how techno-Orientalism can be conceived of aesthetically, in contrast with the futuristic grit of classic cyberpunk texts such as *Blade Runner*.

## Imagining Asian Futures: Tracing the Evolution of Techno-Orientalism

While Edward Said addressed how Europe has historically treated representations of Islam in its art and literature in *Orientalism*, his idea that Orientalist thought is informed by paranoia was hugely influential in the development of techno-Orientalism.<sup>17</sup> In *Spaces of Identity*, David Morley and Kevin Robins define techno-Orientalism as a cultural manifestation of Western fears and anxieties surrounding Japan’s technological and economic developments in the late twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> Europe and North America perceived the country’s modernity as conflicting with Western modernity, and techno-Orientalism was used to bring Japan back into the schema of self-versus-Other through a “manic assertion of difference.” Japan was portrayed in Western cultural products “as the figure of empty and dehumanised technological power,” home to “unfeeling aliens . . . cyborgs and replicants.”<sup>19</sup> Techno-Orientalism has been observed most visibly in science fiction or “cyberpunk” texts such as William Gibson’s novel *Neuromancer*, Joss Whedon’s television series *Firefly*, and the often-cited *Blade Runner* franchise. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu characterize the worlds built in these texts, imbued with darkness and grunge, “as contradictory spaces of futuristic innovation and ancient mystique.”<sup>20</sup> Vaporwave similarly mashes up Japanese technological artifacts with images of abandoned malls, and futuristic cyberscapes with retro color palettes, seeming to portend, or at least comment upon, a vision of the future defined by techno-Orientalist anxieties around hyper-consumerism, conformity, and dependence on technology.

Much work has been done to develop these ideas since the height of the “Japan panic” in the 1990s, which does more to acknowledge the autonomy of the participants on both sides in processes of appropriation and adaptation.<sup>21</sup> While Orientalism suspends Asia in a “traditional, and often premodern imagery,” for Roh, Huang, and Niu, techno-Orientalism “presents a broader, dynamic, and often contradictory spectrum of images, constructed by the East and West alike, of an ‘Orient’ undergoing rapid economic and cultural transformations.”<sup>22</sup> Fabienne Darling-Wolf’s reading of Japan’s history of cultural exchange with Europe and the resulting influence on European art and intellectual movements follows this point. She argues that previous examinations of European Orientalism have downplayed Japan’s framed the island’s soft power as a mere respite from America’s cultural dominance, and have downplayed Japan’s active role in facilitating these cultural exchanges.<sup>23</sup> While the frequent anonymity of both producers and consumers in vaporwave renders it difficult to trace and analyze the geographical directions of these exchanges, the sense of placelessness this fosters also allows for a detachment from binary notions of cultural relationships or one-directional media flows, and for a view similar to Darling-Wolf’s of the techno-Orientalism in vaporwave as a result of a complex amalgamation of global influences.

Representations of gender and sexuality in techno-Orientalist texts nevertheless continue to perpetuate what Minjeong Kim and Angie Y. Chung describe as “the notion of the Orient as the culturally-inferior” Other, which converges with “the concept of women as the gender-inferior Other.” These notions of inferiority represent “White men’s heterosexual desire for (Oriental) women and for Eastern territories through the feminization of the Orient,” played out through portrayals of Asian women in Western media as sensual and subservient.<sup>24</sup> For Kathryn Allan, the “techno-Orientalized female” is rendered in texts that reinforce these stereotypes as “as a body who enacts her (limited) agency for the benefit of the white male user,” not a character possessing agency but a “part of the exotic backdrop in some Westernized cyber-fantasy.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, in techno-Orientalist texts, location is typically obscured in favor of what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun describes as the “dispersal of global capitalism and networks” via cyberspace, which “allows one to conquer a vaguely threatening Oriental landscape” through exotic, and often erotic, fantasies.<sup>26</sup> Allan recognizes the potential for resistance to these “traditional” usages of the female body in feminist post-cyberpunk texts, necessitating close attention to how these bodies are represented, and potentially exploited, in more recent cultural trends with techno-Orientalist elements.<sup>27</sup>

While other scholars who have written about vaporwave discuss the use of East Asian characters and imagery as simply a reinforcement of the genre’s other defining characteristics, McLeod’s reading takes this observation a step further, discussing how the nature of the vaporwave scene as a space within which anyone can occupy a different

identity makes it vulnerable to acts of techno-Orientalist appropriation.<sup>28</sup> What he leaves open to questioning is how vaporwave's status as an Internet genre necessitates a reexamination of techno-Orientalist themes in musical paratexts that are often static images, brief video clips, or visual mash-ups of other media texts spread through largely anonymous digital flows. Moreover, while McLeod acknowledges vaporwave's parodic references to the soft power effect that has made Japanese and Korean youth culture so popular among Western consumers, the lack of critical acknowledgement of the genre's reinforcement of "racially reductive tropes" within what is otherwise a highly self-aware musical community goes unacknowledged.<sup>29</sup>



# Where are We Now?: Location and Power in Vaporwave's Techno-Orientalism



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Figure-1-Lucy-March.jpg>

Figure 1. Cover image for XWave's 2016 album *Vaporwave for China*.

Scholars of vaporwave have recognized the power of the online spaces where vaporwave is produced, transmitted, and criticized in reinforcing its musical and aesthetic characteristics.<sup>30</sup> Through engagement with vaporwave on platforms like Reddit, YouTube, and Bandcamp, producers and fans are invited through digital communities to make sense of the perils of capitalism through the lens of the genre. At the same time, the nebulous relationships between people and places fostered by the Internet have led to the widespread co-option of global cultural relics for entertainment purposes.<sup>31</sup> Grafton Tanner compares vaporwave to other online phenomena that have sought to unsettle through

distortions of pop culture relics, from the horror film *Cabin in the Woods* to the bizarre video mashup genre YouTube Poops (YTPs). Vaporwave similarly plays with retro images of East Asian culture to elicit a sense of consumerist nostalgia, while maintaining the sense of placelessness that surrounds the genre through the mixing of these elements with cultural artifacts that are difficult to code geographically.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, locating vaporwave geographically has been a problem that other scholars have grappled with, with varying degrees of success. Tanner seems to contradict himself in this respect, at one point asserting that vaporwave is not situated in any particular time nor place, and later arguing that most vaporwave albums are set in a "Western capitalistic society."<sup>33</sup> McLeod correctly observes that some vaporwave producers are located in Asia, though many of the genre's major labels, including Dream Catalogue, Business Casual, and the now-defunct Beer on the Rug are based in the United States or Europe.<sup>34</sup> However, most vaporwave artists have no real public persona, as most conceal their identities behind aliases often "referencing an invented jargon of dystopic corporate or commercially related business names" or incorporating an often nonsensical jumble of Japanese or Korean characters.<sup>35</sup> The lack of live performances even at the height of the genre's popularity reinforces this sense of anonymity. That anonymity renders the notion of techno-Orientalist co-option in vaporwave, in the traditional sense of the "West" appropriating the "East," far less useful.

Further complicating matters, vaporwave is based just as much in imaginative notions of Western culture, demonstrated by the use of Greek columns, busts, and other such elements in its paratexts. Examples of vaporwave subgenres like "Simpsonwave" in which tracks using distorted samples from the iconic television show are played over clips from the Simpson's earlier episodes (the seasons that aired in the 1990s are widely considered to be the show's strongest) demonstrates that American pop culture nostalgia also occupies a prominent position in vaporwave's cultural *mélange*.<sup>36</sup> These fusions of cultural elements lead to a sort of "hyper hybrid" text that scholars struggle to place into a particular cultural category. Adam Trainer advises that this type of text is symptomatic of digital technologies which allow for the mining and reuse of information, and "the confluence of texts from various points on the spectrum of cultural production, which can now be merged to create entirely new hybrid texts."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, this emphasis on reproduction in vaporwave, which allows potential producers to easily apply vaporwave's aesthetic "formula" to a theme of their choosing, leads to the creation of often nonsensical and parodic cultural representations that imply a sense of ironic self-awareness on the part of the creator.

This tendency toward irony, parody, and ambivalence in vaporwave is often cited by commentators as a way of "telling the genre" which, as Whelan and Nowak describe, can

simultaneously act as a “getaway vehicle” in the context of critical conversations around the music.<sup>38</sup> McLeod cites the example of a vaporwave offshoot known as Trumpwave, which uses image of the former US President set against typically vaporwave settings and is strongly associated with the alt-right movement, to show how the genre as a memetic form can nevertheless be appropriated in harmful ways under the guise of satire.<sup>39</sup> Similarly dark examples of cultural co-option, though less common, can also be seen in vaporwave’s references to East Asia. Examples of vaporwave texts like Missouri-based Lush Crayon’s 2020 album *CoronaWave*, which includes tracks like “W U H A N” and “Quarantine or Die, Scum,” bring to mind the problematic discourses around China’s role in the global coronavirus pandemic, which led to a sharp increase in incidents of violence and harassment towards Asian Americans. In 2016, vaporwave artist pepsiman (stylized in Japanese as | ペプシマン|) released an album on Bandcamp titled “9/11,” featuring a cover with an image of the twin towers and track titles such as “Al-Qaeda” and “Taliban Nights.” On their Bandcamp page, pepsiman encouraged their followers to “celebrate the 15th anniversary [of 9/11]” by purchasing a limited release of the album on cassette.<sup>40</sup> Despite their presentation as satirical texts, these examples nevertheless bring to mind the tendency of center nations like the US to engage in Othering as a means to make sense of national tragedies or even global pandemics.

As the above examples demonstrate, the anonymous and locationless nature of digital vaporwave, the often hybrid nature of its paratexts, and its ironic packaging do not mitigate the potential harm that cultural representations within this genre can cause. Therefore, instances of cultural stereotyping occurring within the vaporwave subculture must be examined with broader considerations of context and power dynamics. As Darling-Wolf argues in a reflection on the terrorist attack of the French satirical newspaper in response to their printing an image of Muhammad, “regardless of their creator’s intentions, *Charlie Hebdo*’s cartoons must be considered in relationship to the long history of Orientalist visual representations of the ‘Other’ throughout the French media.”<sup>41</sup> At the same time, the anonymous nature of the scene and ambiguous cultural contexts for many vaporwave works can potentially obscure both creator intentions and the local/global dynamics at play in these representations. Critical analyses of vaporwave must nevertheless consider how these texts are, as Kim and Chung put it, “perpetuating Orientalist meanings that reaffirm the dominant status” of whiteness for a global audience. In the case of an Internet genre like vaporwave that has achieved considerable cultural and even commercial success through online music marketplaces like Discogs, such representations have the tendency to encourage “neither identification with nor education about Asian cultures, but . . . commodification and ‘objectification,’” and in some cases even villainization.<sup>42</sup> Examining the various ways in which cultural elements are used and fused together in vaporwave is key to understanding how these fusions could be interpreted or further co-opted in problematic ways.

# Sources of Pleasure: Nostalgia and Gender in Vaporwave

YouTube upload of 식료품groceries's 2014 album 슈퍼마켓Yes! We're Open.

Scholars of vaporwave have tended to focus on the unsettling ways in which the genre's paratexts remind the viewer of the consequences of late capitalism and technological dominance. A key concept introduced by Tanner in relation to vaporwave is philosopher Jacques Derrida's hauntology, an "update to postmodernism's critique of history" which shifts the focus to a future we feel we have already lost—in this case, that which capitalism promised in the past but has not come to fruition.<sup>43</sup> There is room to consider vaporwave's use of East Asian text and imagery in Tanner's reading of hauntology as it makes sense of the capitalist elements in vaporwave: it puts on visual display memories of an economically prosperous period in Japanese history during the 1980s and 1990s, one that ultimately failed to deliver on the promises of global capitalism and instead resulted in a "lost decade" of economic stagnation.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, vaporwave's often bright and cheery visuals present a strong contrast to more widely understood notions of techno-Orientalist texts in the *Blade Runner* camp, and the dreary futures they envision. An analysis of the use of East Asia cultural imagery in vaporwave reveals very different forces at play than a sense of dread about a capitalist future, and rather than haunting the viewer, it invites them to come along for the ride.

Vaporwave's use of East Asian elements easily lend themselves to the notions of pleasure: Ross Cole finds "unexpected pleasure latent in vaporwave's playful remediations" with

advertising and popular culture of a bygone era.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Chun's theorization of the Internet as a "vacation space, in which responsibility is temporarily suspended in favor of self-indulgence" makes it the perfect home for the genre.<sup>46</sup> However, the pleasure-evoking imagery in vaporwave is markedly different from Chun's cyberpunk examples from Japanese and American media: contrast the cyborg pin-up aesthetic of The Major in Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* with a disembodied hand holding a Fiji water bottle, or a perfectly coiffed model in a 1980s Pocari Sweat advertisement. Vaporwave's visual narratives depict leisurely (though arguably spiritually unfulfilling) activities afforded by life spent embracing capitalism, such as playing video games, eating at a fast-food restaurant, or driving your Pontiac down a palm-tree lined highway. As Harper suggests, all of these paratextual characteristics contribute to "the suggestion that the release was produced by some corporation as mood music for a lifestyle of business, shopping or luxurious downtime."<sup>47</sup> Vaporwave consumption offers the same potential benefits of pleasure for the viewer as the texts considered in Chun's treatment of high-tech Orientalism, but in a bright, nostalgic package.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Figure-2-Lucy-March-1.jpg> >

Figure 2. Cover art for vaporwave mix uploaded to YouTube.

Laura Glitsos's work is key for understanding how feelings of nostalgia for East Asian popular culture, both real and invented, function as pleasure in vaporwave. While her analysis also brings in the unsettling aspects of the vaporwave listening experience, she finds that "the pleasure of vaporwave is . . . understood as a pleasure of remembering for the sake of the act of remembering itself"<sup>48</sup> In one example, she quotes a Reddit user for whom vaporwave brings to mind memories of his childhood in Okinawa, and the music he

enjoyed listening to at that time in his life. Vaporwave listening need not bring to mind memories of one's direct experiences with a certain time or place, however: "memory is 'crowd-sourced' to and from the vaporwave aesthetic" and therefore "memory is only another commodifiable object . . . which produces this sense of nostalgia for something that may or may not 'belong' to any particular past."<sup>49</sup> Uses of images from older anime series in vaporwave contribute to this sense of detached nostalgia, even for those listeners who may not have witnessed the "Cool Japan" marketing strategy at its height. Herb L. Fondevilla's analysis of mass media in the Philippines between 2006 and 2014 similarly demonstrates how a generation that grew up consuming Japanese media incorporated these influences into their own country's sense of nostalgia through media production.<sup>50</sup> The same argument could certainly be made for the vaporwave community that, as Born and Haworth observe, appears to be on its surface "squarely Anglo-American."<sup>51</sup> In this case, the enduring global influence of "Cool Japan" and, increasingly, Korean popular culture ensures that the uses of these nostalgic elements hold some familiarity with the viewer, or may even bring to mind fond memories of one's own engagement with these cultural texts. However, a closer look at the pleasurable imagery in vaporwave reveals the potentially insidious consequences of vaporwave's representations of Asian bodies when viewed through the lenses of Orientalism and gender.

Histories of Orientalist representations (including techno-Orientalism and self-Orientalism) have often served as a means to fulfill Western desires to view self-affirming portrayals of the exoticized Asian woman.<sup>52</sup> Ellie Hisama identifies the social assumptions about Asian women that allow for these sorts of depictions in American popular music: the passive and subservient role they take on in romantic relationships (particularly with Western men), their unique brand of innocent sexuality, or the role placed upon them as objects representing a monolithic Asian culture.<sup>53</sup> Asian or Asian-coded women similarly serve as 2-D vessels for consumerist pleasure in vaporwave paratexts in such a way that reinforces these stereotypes. Footage used in vaporwave mixes will often feature clips from 1980s and 1990s commercials for Japanese consumer products, which largely make use of female models, to help advertise everything from cars to beverages. Whether dressed casually or in professional attire, these women almost always have a clean and conservative appearance. Through their participation in many of the activities typically depicted in vaporwave paratexts, such as shopping, vacationing in a tropical paradise, or enjoying a Coca-Cola while playing in a fountain, these women invite the viewer to participate in nostalgic capitalist pleasures.





<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Figure-3-Lucy-March.jpg>

Figure 3. Cover image for Leisure Center's 2016 album *High Fashion*.

Lisa Nakamura finds that the attractions in online representations of Asian bodies "lie not only in being able to 'go' to exotic places, but to co-opt the exotic and attach it to oneself. The appropriation of racial identity becomes a form of recreation, a vacation from fixed identities and locales."<sup>54</sup> In addition to their promotion of consumer-oriented activities, idiosyncratic edits such as partially or completely obscuring the faces of female models in vaporwave allow for this co-option of the "exotic," while simultaneously transforming these figures into pleasurable props for these musical commodities. Popular vaporwave artists often employ these visual strategies on the limited physical copies of albums that serve to generate hype about new releases. For example, the cover of 猫 シ Corp's *Palm Mall Mars*, the second in a series of influential albums that served to define the vaporwave subgenre mallsoft, features an edited photo of a dark-haired woman dressed in kimono gazing away from the viewer and up at an escalator. Artist telepath テレパシー能力者, whose physical releases can command hundreds of dollars on Discogs, frequently employs such images in



his work: a collaborative album with telepath and Silver Richards features bright neon colors and geometric shapes on its cover that contrast with the blurred-out face of the dark-haired woman facing the viewer (Figure 4). The erasure of these women's identities is reminiscent of Chun's reading of cyberpunk texts like *Neuromancer*, where in the experience of browsing Orientalist cyberspace, "there are those who can reason online and those who are reduced to information."<sup>55</sup>

The use of images of female anime characters plays a similar role of facilitating pleasure in vaporwave. Anime women are frequently portrayed in vaporwave's paratexts similarly engaging in leisure activities like relaxing on the beach or simply looking cute for the viewer. While not immediately problematic, the characterization in vaporwave of the anime girl as emblematic of the nostalgic idea of "Cool Japan" could serve to reinforce stereotypes around *otaku* culture as an "adhesion to an infantilized and feminized consumer lifestyle."<sup>56</sup> Left unchecked, representations of young animated women in musical paratexts can enter a moral gray area: for example, Pharrell Williams's 2014 music video "It Girl" which uses an animation sequence featuring of childlike (known popularly as *moé*) girls designed by Takashi Murakami's protégé Iwamoto Masakatsu and produced by Japanese company Kaikai Kiki, garnered criticism for accompanying images of these girls with lyrics like "When you bite on my lip / And hold my hand, and moan again / I'm a hold that ass." In her analysis of "It Girl," Sousa reveals the problematic potential in such instances of cultural mixing in music even when there is a diverse cast of producers involved in a project.<sup>57</sup> While vaporwave's representations of women are almost never overtly sexual, the use of both "real" and anime women as a means to evoke nostalgia for the cultural productions of "Cool Japan" serve as a continuation of the objectification and commercialization of female bodies in Orientalist representations.



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Figure-4-Lucy-March.jpg>

Figure 4. Cover image for telepah テレパシー能力者 And Silver Richards' 2013 album 夜遊.

As Whelan and Nowak observe with regard to the genre work around vaporwave, "the relation between written description and dialogue and the genre is especially consequential in the online contexts where" vaporwave music circulates.<sup>58</sup> Initial observations of these contexts indicate a lack of critical reflection on the genre's representations of racial or gender identities within the vaporwave community. In one post on r/vaporwave, a Reddit user reluctantly wonders about the potential for Asian fetishism in the genre's visual elements, assuring readers that they are not trying to "stir outrage" or be a "triggered [Social Justice Warrior]." Subsequent responses questioning the observation prompted this user to add an edit to their original post: "If I am wrong, would you mind explaining why instead of brushing me off?"<sup>59</sup> A 2015 post on the subreddit r/asianamerican, simply titled "Is vaporwave racist?" garnered a wider range of responses, from irritation ("No lmfao") to ambivalence ("I don't see any reason to take offense if none was ever meant to be given")

to an essay-length response that ultimately concludes “Maybe. But Vaporwave is definitely Orientalist.”<sup>60</sup>

Shedding additional light on this complex dynamic in the vaporwave scene is a Reddit post by well-known female vaporwave artist Luxury Elite. In what is commonly referred to as an AMA post, in which the author encourages her fans to “ask me anything,” she responds to a user who asks how she feels about the “near complete lack of females in the vaporwave genre”:

I’ve never really felt any sort of way about being stuck in a boys club, I guess because everybody in it I already knew outside of it and they were all friends of mine and very encouraging of me doing the Lux project. Plus, there are more women than you’d think! Some just don’t explicitly say it, but I’d say I know about . . . 10 or so? I’m sure there are more out there I don’t know about, either. But I’ve had a lot of women send me Soundcloud and Facebook messages thanking me for being a woman in music and inspiring them to do music themselves so that’s rewarding to me.<sup>61</sup>

While pointing out that being a female producer in a largely male genre has given her the opportunity to inspire other women to pursue their own music careers, Luxury Elite does not explore the potential implications of her characterization of vaporwave as a “boy’s club” or the observation that the female producers she knows of have not publicly revealed their gender identity (likely because, as the response implies, her own experiences in the scene have been positive). While additional research and observations are needed to gauge how audiences respond to racial and gender representations in vaporwave, these examples point toward a lack of critical reflection in the community that could encourage the silencing or Othering of marginalized identities within the scene.



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Figure-5-Lucy-March.jpg>

Figure 5. Cover image for Architecture in Tokyo's 2013 album *Summer Paradise*.

## Concluding Remarks

A qualitative analysis of vaporwave presented in this article finds that while the presence of East Asian cultural elements in the genre's paratexts can complicate outdated notions of cultural flows that have tended to guide analyses of techno-Orientalism, they can still serve to reinforce certain Orientalist stereotypes, particularly with regard to the genre's depictions of women as a means to evoke consumerist pleasure. The use of Korean and Chinese cultural elements and text in the genre's paratexts also requires an analysis of vaporwave's brand of techno-Orientalism beyond the Japan-US cultural relationship, with consideration to how such imagery "subsumes all of East Asia into a single universalizing entity."<sup>62</sup> The anonymity inherent in the production and sharing of online musical genres requires a rethinking of how scholars approach themes like techno-Orientalism to expand the analysis beyond outdated conceptions of power dynamics. Finally, initial observations

of the audience and producer dialogue around representations of diverse racial and gender identities in vaporwave finds that a lack of critical examinations of those representations in the community could allow for the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes around those identities.

In his piece, McLeod quotes the well-known vaporwave producer Ramona Xavier (who goes by the artistic pseudonym Vektroid) describing her 2012 album *Sapporo Contemporary* as a "a parody of American hyper contextualization of e-Asia circa 1995" to argue that through satirizing Japan and Korea's processes of self-Orientalizing, Xavier is effectively reinforcing the positive notions of East Asian popular culture among American consumers that Japan played an active role in building, and even serves to weaken the "previously negative techno-Orientalist stereotypes that globally influential Western sci-fi movies and literature had helped formulate."<sup>63</sup> Vaporwave's aesthetic undoubtedly brings to mind Japan's soft power at its apex, and certainly some elements might serve as an expression of admiration in particular contexts, sometimes to rather extreme lengths (for example, though no longer active, coolmemoryz was a Floridian vaporwave producer who pretended to be from Japan<sup>64</sup>). Even in a satirical framing, however, uses and reproductions of East Asia cultural elements in vaporwave can still serve to reinforce harmful stereotypes consistent with histories of Orientalist representations, such as the objectification of Asian women enforced by vaporwave's play with pleasurable aesthetics.

A possible alternative reading of vaporware's use of gendered imagery might be suggested by Toshiya Ueno's work on the position of women in science fiction and rave music, which emphasizes the agency of the depicted subjects.<sup>65</sup> Given the dearth of Asian voices in the scholarly literature on this genre, however, one can only hypothesize if such a perspective would be equally productive with consideration to vaporwave. These issues of representation in vaporwave are all the more relevant given the increasing popularity of online genres such as lo-fi hip-hop, whose producers and curators make similar use of Japanese cultural imagery to build these genres' aesthetics. Vaporwave even continues to inspire trends in mainstream popular music and culture: a designer who worked with Ariana Grande for her "7 rings" music video cites "the popular internet aesthetic of vaporwave culture, a movement that evokes the neon colors of 80's and 90's pop culture as well as the style of early internet graphic design" as the inspiration for the video's title graphic.<sup>66</sup> Vaporwave may be "dead," but its cultural reverberations continue to echo through online musical spaces, making their way into our imaginations and forming new memories of pasts that may never have occurred and futures that may never come to pass. Observers should pay careful attention to these reverberations and the potential that they hold to exclude or harm.

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## Scene Tracing: The Replication and Transformation of Global Industry, Movements, and Genres in Local Game Production

by Chris J. Young | Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

**ABSTRACT** The notion of scenes has helped frame how particular clusters of cultural activities, practices, and "happenings" simultaneously replicate and transform global practices in specific localities. The study of scenes has aided us in examinations of how geographic and virtual localities create and shape global industries, movements, and genres. In this article, I focus on the Toronto game production scene to examine how it replicates and transforms the wider cultural norms, working conditions, and genre productions of the global game industry. Based on a two-year ethnography of the scene, I survey how gamemakers maintain and challenge the expected norms and practices of industry and platforms in the production of local games. To identify these clusters of cultural activity, I develop the notion of scenes as palimpsests to trace how gamemakers replicate and transform industry cultural norms and practices in the local scene. The last decade has seen the emergence of social media platforms as a venue for participants of scenes to discuss, create, and disseminate their works with geographically local and global audiences. The textual spaces of these platforms connect participants of local production scenes to a global community defined by geography, industry, and genre. By tracing scenes through its inscriptions, I examine how these platforms are centers for encounters between the values and practices of the Toronto game production scene and the wider industry. This article is about how the geographical cultural activities of scenes are shifting into virtual environments, and how these virtual spaces are transforming the cultural norms and practices of gamemaking and its associated activities, such as socials, game jams, and "talking shop." I argue that analyses of globalization must consider the wider physical and virtual infrastructures of local production to understand how cultural media are produced and circulated around the globe.

**KEYWORDS** making, ethnography, video games, production, scenes, local, Toronto

In cultural studies, the notion of scenes has been broadly deployed to connect the spatiality of geography with the temporality of cultural activities and artifacts to understand the role of place in the cultural production of media. Some of the early work of Will Straw, Holly Kruse, and Barry Shanks focused on the emergence of music scenes in urban environments to demonstrate how local genres and practices link to national and global forms of popular music.<sup>1</sup> Much of the work on the cultural production of literature, music, and games has applied the notion of scenes to investigate the importance of place in the wider development of globalized media.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the notion of scenes has helped frame how particular clusters of cultural activities, practices, and “happenings” simultaneously replicate and transform global practices in specific localities.<sup>3</sup> Simply put, the study of scenes has helped us examine how geographic and virtual localities create and shape global industries, movements, and genres.

In this article, I focus specifically on the Toronto game production scene to examine how it replicates and transforms the wider cultural norms, working conditions, and production genres of the global game industry. The Toronto game production scene, henceforth referred to as “the scene,” has numerous physical and virtual spaces for gamemakers to engage in local game production, including game jams, festivals, socials, exhibitions, workshops, talks, and conferences. Many of these spaces are controlled by arts-based organizations, post-secondary institutions, public libraries, game companies, and social media platforms which have their own cultural norms and practices of game production. Gamemakers make do with these organizations and platforms to coordinate activities, share expertise, and create a place for members of the scene to discuss their craft regardless of their geographic or virtual location.<sup>4</sup> Based on a two-year ethnography of the scene and its communities, I survey how these gamemakers maintain and challenge the expected norms and practices of these organizations and platforms in the production of local games in a global industry.<sup>5</sup>

To identify these clusters of cultural activities, practices, and happenings, I develop the notion of scenes as palimpsests to trace how gamemakers replicate and transform the cultural norms and practices of the global game industry in the local scene. Will Straw’s notion of cultural scenes was essential to identify the locations (e.g., Toronto’s Queen Street West), genres of cultural production (e.g., Unity-made games), and social activities (e.g., game jams and socials) of the scene.<sup>6</sup> However, it was by using Gérard Genette’s concept of palimpsest that I was able to trace the inscriptions of how gamemakers replicate and transform game industry norms and practices in the scene.<sup>7</sup> Inscription can refer to textual and other forms of semiotic transmission and dissemination, such as making games with digital tools, sharing images and documents on community forums, and conversing through social media platforms.

The last decade has seen the emergence of social media platforms as a venue for participants of scenes to discuss, create, and disseminate their works with geographically local and global audiences. The textual spaces of these platforms connect participants of local production scenes to a global community of scenes defined by geography, industry, and genre. By tracing scenes through its inscriptions, I examine how these platforms are centers for encounters between the values and practices of the Toronto game production scene and the wider video game industry. That is, I reveal how the physical and virtual infrastructures of scenes are used by gamemakers to make local games in a global industry.

To demonstrate the inscriptions of the scene and the game industry, I trace and examine specific examples: the Torontaru monthly social event where gamemakers gather over drinks, the TOJam annual game jam where gamemakers build a game in less than seventy-two hours, and the monthly Toronto Unity Developers meetup where gamemakers network and discuss their craft of developing the genre of Unity-made games. In these examples, I investigate how gamemakers and organizations use social media platforms to concurrently engage the local scene with the wider movements, practices, and genres of the global game industry. To analyze these examples, I again use Will Straw's notion of scenes, but utilize his more recent ruminations on how scenes can be probed as collectivities, spaces of assembly, workplaces, ethical worlds, spaces of traversal, and as spaces of mediation.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, I contribute to wider conversations on the importance of the local in engaging with wider industry formations and transforming modes of cultural production.

The data discussed draws from interviews and field notes documenting the scene's ephemerality and the recorded inscriptions of scene members on social media platforms. I draw upon forty-one in-depth interviews with nine participants and over four hundred hours of participant observations recorded as field notes from 2014 to 2016 as part of a larger ethnographic study of game workers and the game production scene in the Greater Toronto Area, Canada. Canada is in the global top five in terms of employment numbers in the game industry, with Toronto the home to dozens of independent and triple-A studios developing games for mobile and console platforms.<sup>9</sup> Within Toronto there is a vibrant community of gamemakers who participate in game jams, meetups, and socials, which make the scene an ideal place to learn, network, and make games for the global industry.

I interviewed nine gamemakers three to five times over two years to follow their careers and understand how they use industry tools and resources to create their games during different stages of the gamemaking process.<sup>10</sup> I participated in seventy-one activities at speaker and microtalk events, workshops, online and in-person discussion groups for gamemakers, social gatherings, game jams, and collaborative coworking spaces. This

fieldwork is contextualized by a critical discourse analysis of a gamemaker ecosystem of editors, tools, and resources.

It is only through tracing these inscriptions that the hidden involvement of scenes in the development of infrastructures in the city, the global game industry, and shared local places of gamemaking becomes visible. This article is about how the geographical cultural activities of scenes are shifting into virtual environments, and how these virtual spaces are transforming the cultural norms and practices of gamemaking and its associated activities, such as socials, "talking shop," and professional networking. I argue that analyses of globalization must take into consideration the wider physical and virtual infrastructures of local production to understand how cultural media are produced and circulated around the globe.

## Tracing the Inscriptions of the Game Production Scene

Daniel Joseph argues the game industry is "the canary in the coal mine" of capitalism in how the formations of game production tell us about the industry's dangers and the new forms of resistance emerging in response.<sup>11</sup> Many of the technological infrastructures (e.g., handheld devices), business models of accumulating capital (e.g., free-to-play games or free-to-download mobile apps), and the governance structures of managing communities (e.g., end-user license agreements and non-disclosure agreements) emerged from the formalized publishers and platforms of the game industry, which sought to control the flow of capital from the workers who produce the games to the consumers who play the games.<sup>12</sup> Since the emergence of game studies as a critical interdisciplinary field of scholarship in the early 2000s, the field of game production studies has provided insightful analyses into understanding how games are produced, distributed, and consumed.

Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter's field-defining work *Digital Play* developed the three circuits model of marketing, technology, and culture to examine the production, commodification, and consumption of games as interactive objects that are part of the "perpetual innovation economy."<sup>13</sup> As they note, "the relatively short-lived play value of software and the successive waves of hardware innovation in the technology circuit create an incessant upgrade dynamic of new commodity releases. The launch of each new game and console burns up financial, symbolic, and creative capital by the gallon as promotional innovation and consumer resistance pursue each other in a rocketing upward spiral."<sup>14</sup> In short, the reliance on contingent technologies means business models and governance structures are "perpetually innovated," which ripples across the game industry sector to limit how gamemakers produce and players interact with games. These

ripples have led to perpetual overwork and “crunch” of gamemakers, poor working conditions and frequent layoffs, and a hyper-white and masculinized industry that subjects its female and minoritized members to harassment from both within and outside the industry from male colleagues and players alike.<sup>15</sup>

Much of the game production scholarship examining these ripples focus on four thematic areas: the below-the-line labor of game testers and community managers, and the gendered work of game promotion; the creative game development of industry developers and “indie” or independent solo gamemakers; player-production of modders that modify commercial games and the metaplayers of community resources like walkthroughs; and game labor politics with a close look at autonomous game production, coworking spaces and women-run incubators, and the possible organization and unionization of pan-industry game workers.<sup>16</sup> These areas not only underline the geographic, industrial, and cultural sites of game production and its relationship to wider formations of global game production, but also the variety of gamemakers contributing to the development and dissemination of games worldwide. The thread that ties these gamemakers together across work and leisure sites is they all use the same tools, products, and services to build their games, and discuss their craft at venues widely dubbed as part of the scene.

Throughout my ethnography, these gamemakers referred to their local game production community in Toronto as the “game dev scene” or, simply, the “dev scene.” These gamemakers were referring to professionalized game developers and their participation in the scene. Their interpretation of gamemaking was highly professionalized, which captured gamemakers from the mainstream developers working for Ubisoft Toronto to students at George Brown College (GBC) to the indies working at Bento Miso Collaborative Studio (now Gamma Space) and the hobbyists participating at the annual TOJam game jam. Even though these developers were not necessarily developers in the professionalized sense of the term, they were nonetheless captured in participants’ perceptions of what it meant to participate and be a member of the scene.

I use Straw’s notion of cultural scene as my theoretical framework to capture the range of geographic and virtual places in which gamemakers develop their games. According to Straw, “scene designates particular clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them.”<sup>17</sup> A cultural scene “invites us to map the territory of the city in new ways while, at the same time, designating certain kinds of activity whose relationship to territory is not easily asserted.”<sup>18</sup> Scenes are important centers of cultural activity that allow us to trace a range of local norms and practices, such as gamemaking organizations, social media spaces, and online forums.

Defining the boundaries of a scene can be problematic when the framework behind what constitutes a cultural scene is elusive. Straw suggests that cultural scenes “take shape,



much of the time, on the edges of cultural institutions which can only partially absorb and channel clusters of expressive energy which form within urban life."<sup>19</sup> In my fieldwork, institutions ranged from university clubs and programs, to not-for-profit organizations, to online forums surrounding a specific developer tool. Straw further suggests "scenes may be ways of 'processing' the abundance of artifacts and spaces which sediment within cities over time."<sup>20</sup>

Identifying which artifacts and places are relevant is critical to understand gamemaking and the boundaries of the scene. What constitutes a unit of analysis can be contextually bound moments in space and time. Participation in a social activity, such as a game jam, could be pivotal in the development of a gamemaker's social network and their perceptions of what are considered acceptable working conditions. Working at a game studio located in Toronto could place a gamemaker amongst a group of experienced developers with established industry practices and norms. Developing a game using the Unity Editor as a genre of production could direct a gamemaker towards certain tools and resources, or even set them on a career path working for a studio that uses Unity. I paid close attention to the artifacts and places embedded within the locations, social activities, and genres of production, which surround each stage of a gamemaker's game and career development.

Following the activity of gamemaking took me to virtual places beyond geographic locations. Sara Grimes, Brendan Keogh, and Holly Kruse have examined online gaming scenes, independent game production scenes, and music scenes, respectively, which has been vital in tracing how creators are exposed to a range of places that are simultaneously geographic and virtual, local and global.<sup>21</sup> This meant I also considered the textual-based, virtual places of scenes, not just the ephemeral social activities and happenings across the urban landscape. I expanded the scope of what it meant to participate, identify, and engage with the scene, regardless of the medium in which the activity took place. With the prevalence of social media platforms, the everyday activities of scenes increasingly transform into formalized inscriptions for anyone online to access.

In *Palimpsests*, Genette examines the relationships between literary texts and how they were reread and rewritten over time. All *hypertexts*, the texts under examination, can be traced to *hypotexts*, earlier texts, which represent transtextual relationships that bridge previous works to contemporary ones. These transtextual relationships are transformations, a kind of bricolage, where authors create their works based-upon the hypotexts that come before them. These forms of transtextuality are what Genette referred to as hypertextuality or palimpsests: a surface that has been written upon several times, often with remnants of the erased inscriptions still visible. In cultural studies, this process is widely referred to as a form of remix culture, which can be found in grassroots movements that produce zines, mixtapes, and video game mods.<sup>22</sup>

With the rise of social media, scenes increasingly become palimpsests, where members and organizations inscribe their norms and practices across the virtual platforms of the internet. When tethered to virtual spaces, scenes reveal the scrapings and inscriptions of these stakeholders struggling to assert their authority upon the surface of the scene.<sup>23</sup> These organizations include mainstream establishments, local organizations, and grassroots movements, which appropriate and resist one another's physical and social infrastructures. These infrastructures range from physical and geographic locations to digital systems and architectures, which place the surface of the scene across disparate ecologies of shared activities.

Kate Eichhorn in her study of the New York art scene of the 1970s examined the use of Xerox machines to trace how scenes spill over and migrate beyond geographic proximities.<sup>24</sup> Xerox machines were used to photocopy posters and zines to promote artists work and events connecting members of the New York scene to adjacent neighborhoods and artist groups around the globe. Eichhorn argued, scenes "may originate in the local but are often taken up around the world. Likewise global scenes frequently take on a local specificity . . . scenes get inscribed in local geographies and re-inscribed in global ones."<sup>25</sup> Eichhorn sought to unmoor the concept of scenes from geographical definitions of the local to trace how communication technologies have always connected members and audiences of scenes. However, it is important to note that Eichhorn emphasized that to participate in the activities of the New York scene, members had to physically live within its geographical boundaries. The ability of members to participate in a scene beyond its immediate geographical neighborhood has historically not always been possible.

Social media platforms have become the point through which members of the scene interact to inscribe their competing norms and practices. Social media here refers to networked digital environments, which enable users to create and share content or to participate in cultural activities. As with most contemporary cultural activities, materialities are shared between in-person and virtual environments. Gamemakers participate in local meetups situated in urban neighborhoods and virtual spaces to experience the activity of gamemaking. While the initial entry point to the scene is Toronto, gamemakers access information about the activities of their local communities through Facebook groups, following Twitter handles and Instagram accounts, and joining Slack and Discord channels. Social media is essential for any gamemaking organization to inform their members and to recruit potential participants for activities in the scene. In many ways, virtual locations both complement the scene's geographic locations and serve as additional entry points for aspiring or interested gamemakers to participate.

These online sites of inscription are also venues for other scenes where gamemakers participate in online game jams, such as Ludum Dare, and online workshops, such as Unity Technologies' live training. While these other scenes are not part of the Toronto scene, they highlight the ways in which activities typically associated with geographic locations, such as game jams and workshops, are appropriated by other organizations to draw global communities of gamemakers. Companies like Unity Technologies have been effective at tapping into these local scenes by providing free access to their developer tools and documentation.<sup>26</sup> This gift economy approach, where free labor is conducted by users in exchange for the use of otherwise inaccessible tools, resources, and opportunities, enables these companies to build a community of gamemakers around their tool, and to directly engage and influence the norms and practices of local scenes.<sup>27</sup>

Social media has enabled forms of participation in scenes that were not possible in previous years and has shaped the scene in ways that were only emergent when this ethnography was conducted. As the scene extends its surface across geographic landscapes of urban life and online boundaries of digital environments, tracing its materialities of inscription reveal the constant struggles of appropriation and resistance between local and global stakeholders in Toronto and the global game industry. While this article discusses some activities of the Toronto scene and those who participate in it, it is also about the decline of a scene's ephemerality and its unique happenings, and the ways that online forms of inscription have created localized infrastructures within globalized networks tethered to industry products and interests.

## Torontaru Monthly Social

The Get Well Bar is located near the intersection of Dundas Street West and Ossington Avenue in West Queen West. The space is approximately ten thousand square feet and has a bricolage aesthetic of reused furniture and ornaments, dispersed along white brick walls with vintage-styled oil paintings in gold-decorated frames. At the back of the bar are a dozen retro game cabinets with titles such as *Ms. Pacman*, *Donkey Kong Junior*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, to name but a few. This environment of vintage decor and retro game cabinets makes the bar a natural venue for gamemakers to meet socially for the monthly social event Torontaru.

The organizers of the event describe it as "a monthly meet-up with the simple aspirations of providing a place for friendly, game-inclined ladies and gents (whether you make 'em or you like 'em!) to chat and have a pint. No-fuss funtimes, every last Wednesday of the month!"<sup>28</sup> At any monthly meetup, Torontaru hosts approximately thirty to one hundred gamemakers, particularly aspiring gamemakers, who chat about their game projects over

pints. The event was initiated by a few prominent gamemakers in June 2013 who felt a social event for local gamemakers was necessary.<sup>29</sup> The event took inspiration from the Tokyo game production scene's Otaru Nomikai, which broadly translates to Otaru drinking party.<sup>30</sup> Organized by 8-4, a game localization company in Shibuya, Tokyo, Otaru began in 2003 as a weekly meetup every Thursday night for people interested in gamemaking.<sup>31</sup> Held at the restaurant Taishuukappoutouhachi, gamemakers would sit, drink, and discuss their craft.

Torontaru bridges the essence of the Otaru meetup with the locality of Toronto—hence Torontaru. While gamemakers talk about their craft over pints at Torontaru, the event is also an unofficial networking event for gamemakers to recruit potential collaborators. During an interview, Margot describes a networking experience at Torontaru, which led to a potential collaboration on a gamemaking project:

Margot: Ah, I can't remember the guy's name, but I see him all the time. He's at Torontaru and he was an engineer at [game studio], and he hated his job and he quit and started a one-man show and put it in an iPhone app.

Interviewer: [Name]?

Margot: Yes! He wants to meet me on Saturday and have lunch with me because he needs someone to help him . . . . He's making a new app that he wants good assets for. I think he made a lot of the assets himself, but I think he wants to tow the waters with a partner, and I'd be cool with that.<sup>32</sup>

Margot networked with a gamemaker that we had both met at Torontaru, hence my familiarity with his name when she described his background. It turned out this gamemaker required an artist to create all the assets for a mobile game he was designing and programming after he went independent following his departure from a prominent studio in Toronto. This aspect underlines how Torontaru is not just a social gathering for gamemakers to discuss their craft, but also a testing ground for gamemakers to network and find potential collaborators. While much of gamemaking revolves around computational and artistic forms of development, gamemakers require collaborators, playtesters, and venues to market and showcase their games.

As Torontaru is held at the bar Get Well, and is not hosted within a private space, anyone from the public can drink and socialize with the participants at Torontaru. Torontaru implemented a new safe spaces policy at the March 2015 social, where trusted volunteers wore Octopus buttons to address any concerns from attending gamemakers.<sup>33</sup> At the time, I was unaware of the motivations for the new safe spaces policy. It was only after I had a conversation with an acquaintance that I was directed to how an incident at the February 2015 social was documented on Twitter. The day after Torontaru was held on February 25, 2015, the Torontaru Twitter account released the following tweet: "Just a reminder that

Torontaru is an inclusive, no-nonsense drinking night for **\*\*ALL\*\*** video game humans. Harassment will not be tolerated.”<sup>34</sup> As I looked at other Twitter handles that engaged with the tweet from Torontaru, I was able to trace several tweets referring to the incidents at Torontaru on the night of February 25, 2015. One Twitter user stated that a man had claimed a friend was a “diversity hire,” and assumed that herself and a friend worked in “HR or something” and were not gamemakers.<sup>35</sup>

Women have frequently been the target of in-person and virtual harassment and abuse as has been exemplified by public Twitter hashtags, like #1reasonwhy and #gamergate, and frequent news reports of toxic workplace cultures, including Ubisoft Toronto in 2020.<sup>36</sup> While the game industry is not unique to issues of gender discrimination in the workplace, the incident is consistent with scholarship that has demonstrated how women are widely perceived to be in marketing, human resources, and administrative roles and not the production roles of developer, artist, and engineer.<sup>37</sup> This perception of “legitimate work” in the game industry emphasizes not only how scenes are influenced by wider industry norms, but also how organizations like Torontaru resist and establish their own inclusive practices to address persistent inequalities.

Starting with the hypertext tweet of Torontaru’s safe spaces policy announcement, I was able to trace the hypotexts, tweets of the gamemakers who reported the incident which led to formation of the safe spaces policy. The replies, retweets, and interlinking conversations on Twitter demonstrates how tracing the scene as palimpsest can reveal the hypertextual discourse of movements within a scene. Many of these discourses are held in private conversation amongst organizers and groups within the scene which are not always accessible to researchers in understanding why specific policies and actions are undertaken. But as is increasingly becoming the case, gamemakers will make their values known publicly and call out misogyny, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination in their local place of the wider game industry.

Straw refers to the values which preside over specific cultural activities in scenes as *ethical worlds*.<sup>38</sup> Straw elaborates that these ethical worlds follow “the shaping of tastes, political identities, and protocols of behaviour which set the boundaries (however fragile) of a scene and serve as the basis for its self-perpetuation.”<sup>39</sup> In the Torontaru encounter, gamemakers resisted the wider cultural norms and working conditions of misogyny and sexual harassment of the game industry. The scene had its own expected behaviors for interactions between members, but as the incident highlights, these behaviors had to become inscribed and formalized into a safe spaces policy that defines harassment, how to report harassment, and the consequences for those perpetrating harassment. As such, Torontaru’s Twitter account became both a center for discourse around behavioral protocols at events and around the scene’s wider values and stance on misogyny and

harassment in the game industry. Though the incident exposes how the scene interacts with industry cultural norms and practices, the encounter underlines how Toronto explicitly inscribed publicly, and globally, that while these gender discrimination issues may be tolerated and allowed to proliferate in studios, publishers, and events around the globe, they have no place in the cultural activities of the Toronto scene.

## TOJam Annual Game Jam

Game jams are a unique environment of the game industry: short and intense gamemaking events that typically take place over a weekend from anywhere between twenty-four and seventy-two hours. The term plays on *jam*, which refers to the practice of musicians improvising over a defined period of time to produce a music track, such as a song. Like the musicians, gamemakers create collaboratively within a short period of time. In the case of a game jam, gamemakers design and create a game, or at least a prototype of a game. The brevity and intensity of the game jam means that gamemakers must be efficient in their use of time and resources, and simple in designing the scope of their game.

Game jams are the defining feature of the Toronto scene. There are several annual game jams, including the Royal Ontario Museum Jam, Board Game Jam, and the Toronto Global Game Jam, as well as seasonal game jams arranged by organizations like Dames Making Games. But, it was the Toronto Game Jam, commonly referred as TOJam (pronounced “toe-jam”) that held the first game jam in Toronto. In 2006, the founders of TOJam, Nelson Yu, Jim McGinley, and Emily McGinley, along with other gamemakers in Toronto, discussed the idea of hosting a game jam at their International Game Developer Association (IGDA) Toronto Chapter meetings.<sup>40</sup> The IGDA Toronto Chapter was founded in 2000 and held monthly meetings where developers would socialize and talk about gamemaking. Many of these gamemakers did not work for game companies, and a game jam was perceived as their only entry into making a game; especially when there were only a handful of game studios in Toronto at that time, such as Pseudo Interactive and Groove Games, which closed in 2008 and 2010 respectively.

The first TOJam was hosted over a weekend from May 5–7, 2006 with thirty-five participants, and produced ten completed games and seven “valiant attempts,” or unfinished games.<sup>41</sup> Since then, TOJam has been held annually over a weekend at the end of April or the beginning of May. Over the years, TOJam has expanded, moving to larger venues and drawing gamemakers from around Toronto and the globe. TOJam moved to George Brown College’s (GBC) School of Design in 2011 for TOJam 6 “Sixty Times” at 230 Richmond Street East, before settling at 341 King Street East where the School of Design’s Game Development Program is located for TOJam 7 “The Sevens” in 2012. During my

ethnography, I attended TOJam 10 "Tentacular" and 11 "bELEVEN" in 2015 and 2016 respectively, where there were over 450 participants stretched out over dozens of rooms on the fifth and sixth floors of the building. Rooms are packed with roughly twenty to thirty "jammers," who have access to iMac computers ordinarily used by GBC students. Jammers typically worked on their game projects from late morning until the early hours of the next morning. Sometimes jammers slept on the floor by their computers or pulled an all-nighter to finish their games before the Sunday deadline at 5:00 p.m. Once their games are complete, they upload them onto the online distribution platform, itch.io, under the TOJam game jam event, so users of the website and organizers of TOJam can find and play the completed games.

Social media was a dominant feature of TOJam 10 and 11, especially Twitter. Primarily using the hashtag #TOJam, gamemakers tweeted frequently about both their TOJam and gamemaking experiences. Jammers provided frequent updates on their games-in-progress by providing screen captures of GIF images of their games, such as game menus, art assets, 3D models, and in-engine game captures. Once the game jam was over, these jammers posted itch.io links to their uploaded games. Jammers also followed the #TOJam hashtag throughout the game jam, replying and commenting on each other's games-in-progress and the various happenings throughout the jam, such as when food was ready to be eaten.<sup>42</sup> While Twitter does not replace the actual experience of attending and participating in a game jam, it does provide a timeline of the game jam, documentation of how jammers develop their games, and a window into their gamemaking experiences.

While many of the happenings and discussions at game jams are hidden away behind closed doors, in many ways, one need only tune-in via Twitch and Twitter to see a timeline of how gamemakers develop their games and gauge the experiences of gamemaking before a game is published to itch.io. More importantly though, the hypertextuality of the scene reveals how gamemakers make do with global tools to make and distribute their games. Screenshots of works-in-progress and published games on itch.io reveal a disposition to use industry-made tools in the production of TOJam games. The splash logo at the launch of each game on itch.io shows a variety of tools including Unity, Gamemaker, and Construct. But we also see the inscription of local norms and practices with the TOJam logo of a goat on a pole incorporated into the artwork, narrative, or game mechanics of each game. In this sense, the games produced during the game jam reveal in their textuality the interactions and tensions between the Toronto scene and the global industry tools.

Straw refers to these aspects of scenes as *spaces of assembly* where participants of the scene "perform the often invisible labour of pulling together cultural phenomena in ways which heighten their visibility and facilitate their circulation to other places."<sup>43</sup> In this case,

TOJam brings together the wider practices of gamemaking into a twenty-four- to seventy-two-hour window to demonstrate the cultural production of games in Toronto.

Simultaneously though, the use of Twitch and Twitter by TOJam and its participants broadcasts the scene's cultural activity of producing games to both the local game production community and the wider global game industry. This is demonstrated by the use of the #TOJam hashtag alongside the global #indiegame and #gamedev hashtags to circulate these games-in-progress to other gamemakers and potential player audiences. The juxtaposition of the local scene to the global scene of game production is what Genette refers to as architextuality: "it involves a relationship that is completely silent, articulated at most only by a paratextual mention."<sup>44</sup> As such, the scene as a space of assembly to demonstrate the production of games in Toronto is paratextually linked to wider texts and discourses engaged by global audiences of gamemakers and players.

Though not frequent, some jammers would tweet about their late nights working on their games and waking up early the next morning.<sup>45</sup> While not representative of all gamemakers' game jam experiences, including my own, this practice represents the poor working conditions some gamemakers are willing to endure to complete a game in a weekend. For several decades, the game industry has been rife with what is colloquially referred to as "crunch," an extended period of time where gamemakers, typically working for established studios and publishers, consistently perform extended periods of overtime, sometimes for months on end in one hundred-hour workweeks.<sup>46</sup> While typically enforced by employers, I found gamemakers at game jams would perform a similar version of self-exploitation to complete their game in twenty-four to seventy-two hours.

Straw refers to these kinds of practices as *spaces of mediation*: "documents produced in moments of hidden labor circulate, often without attribution, as the tokens of scenic activity."<sup>47</sup> While gamemakers themselves disseminate these tweets about their activities at TOJam, these cultural activities are often made invisible through the absence of documentation. The replication of crunch, to overwork hours on end within an arbitrary timeline, is indicative of a cultural norm that has become commonplace across all sites and contexts of game production. Whereas Straw was referring to circulated documents like games and other media, what we see through the use of social media in the scene is a textual commentary on the invisible labor that went into the production of a TOJam game. With each tweet circulated during the game jam, we see how the industry norm of crunch is imitated hour-by-hour, day-after-day as gamemakers replicate crunch to produce their final game. Using the notion of scenes as palimpsests I was able to trace all the hypotexts of tweets from gamemakers that documented the labor that went into their hypertext—the TOJam game. Further, by analyzing the #TOJam hashtag, I was able to trace how wider discourses of crunch and precarious working conditions in the game industry are replicated by gamemakers in the scene. In contrast to the previous example on the safe spaces policy



at Torontaru, we don't see a resistance to the wider norms and practices of the industry, but a replication through self-exploitation from the gamemakers themselves.

## Toronto Unity Developers Meetup

The Unity Editor by Unity Technologies has become a prominent tool of game production in recent years and part of its success in becoming a default tool-of-choice has been the company's strategy of promoting the game editor through a variety of activities in local scenes, like Toronto.<sup>48</sup> Some of the predominantly used game editors and tools in the global game industry include the Unity Editor, Unreal Engine 4, GameMaker Studio, Construct 2, Twine, and Pico 8. Game editors are software tools, which streamline the creation of games through drag-and-drop processes, thus requiring minimal coding and technical knowledge. Many of these editors are accompanied by plugins, prefabricated assets, and programs that simplify the gamemaking process. In many cases, they are accompanied by online manuals, wikis, walkthrough videos, and specific genre tutorials that enable gamemakers to learn how to make specific types of games.<sup>49</sup>

In its virtual spaces, these game editors have thousands of participants, many of whom are also members of the Toronto scene. However, for these game editors to be considered a genre of cultural production in the Toronto scene, there needs to be a forum through which local gamemakers connect to one another. During my ethnography, only two game editors had local communities in the scene: the Unity Editor and Unreal Engine 4. The latter game editor community only emerged at the end of my study. Both Unity and Unreal Engine 4 have extensive virtual communities, which connect thousands of gamemakers around the globe, but they also have Meetup groups that represent local, geographic chapters of the game editors.

Meetup is a social media site that connects people around a shared cultural activity—such as a software application—which facilitates the creation and development of geographic scenes. Founded in 2002, Meetup is a way for organizers to manage in-person meetings and for individuals to find groups that suit their interests. Meetup typically localizes members around urban, geographical areas. It achieves this by geolocation of members' postal codes. In the case of the Toronto scene, members will usually enter a postal code beginning with M5S, but Meetup groups can be located if a user is aware of a Meetup group's name, or localized cultural activities, such as "Unity," "Video Game Development," and "Toronto."

Unity was the first game editor to have a Meetup organized for the purposes of connecting gamemakers in Toronto. Named "Toronto Unity Developers," the meetup describes itself as "a group for Toronto based developers interested in the Unity game engine. Developers,

artists and designers of all skill levels are welcome. Learn from professionals and be inspired by independent game developers.”<sup>50</sup> Founded in August 2013, the group held its first meetup on September 12, 2013 at the independent mobile game studio, Uken Games. Founded in 2009, Uken Games has developed fourteen commercially released mobile games for iOS, Android, BlackBerry, Windows Phone, and Facebook, and has approximately fifty employees. Uken, along with the company Unity Technologies, is also a cosponsor of the meetup. Uken and Unity’s investment in the meetup provides publicity for Uken, as a facilitator of the scene, and an opportunity for Unity to expand its reach into the Toronto scene.

Although Uken does not explicitly state in press releases that it develops mobile games with Unity, job postings at the studio frequently include the phrase: “expertise with the Unity game engine.”<sup>51</sup> It is also unlikely Uken would host a Unity meetup if the company was not already using the tool to build mobile games. Events such as these are ways for the studio to meet other talented gamemakers with expertise in Unity for possible recruitment. On several occasions, the organizers announced job postings for positions at Uken and other local studios looking for trained Unity gamemakers. The discussion board on the Meetup group site also frequently included job postings for Unity-based projects.

By the end of my ethnography, the meetup claimed 1,425 online members, though anywhere from fifty to one hundred participants attended any given event. The meetup itself was held infrequently over the year, varying between a month to several months apart. This was likely due to the co-organizers’ availability to coordinate the event and invite guest speakers. As almost all game studios go through periods of “crunch”<sup>52</sup>—the overload of working hours that limits sleep, negatively affects health, and distorts a work life balance—it is also possible that the organizers only held meetups when they were not busy working towards a deadline. The format for the meetup typically involved an introduction by one of the co-organizers, followed by several presentations from guest speakers, and a post-talk social where gamemakers had the opportunity to show off their Unity-made games-in-progress. The latter part of this event was particularly interesting, especially if it fell shortly after a game jam where many attendees would have just made a game with the Unity Editor.

During the July 28, 2016 meetup, the organizers announced there was now a Slack channel for Unity users, which would include gamemakers from across the globe. Within this Slack channel were sub-channels on various topics and local chapters, such as the Toronto Unity Developers meetup. The Toronto chapter of the Unity Slack channel included thirty-six members by the end of my ethnography. Though the group was relatively new, discussions on the channel resembled those of the meetup with job postings, event announcements, and the promotion of recently released games developed in Unity. However, the group also

included technical discussions around the functionality and affordances of Unity where gamemakers posted screenshots of their games-in-development. One of the first substantial posts in the group, beyond the initial “Hello” messages, was a programming issue that a gamemaker had run into. A short discussion quickly developed around the issue, like that of a public forum on Unity’s community website. Other gamemakers on the sub-channel quickly responded, and the issue was resolved following a few screenshots back-and-forth addressing the problem at-hand. The integration of Slack around Unity is an interesting development for the meetup, as it emphasizes how Unity has been adept at connecting gamemakers within localized scenes to the tools and resources around their global community.

Straw refers to these aspects of scenes as *collectivities* marked by some form of proximity.<sup>53</sup> Proximity can apply to just about every cultural activity in a scene that requires members to interact and participate. However, the activities of the Toronto Unity Developers reveal a specific genre of proximity that brings the scene alongside a global community of Unity gamemakers. Members within this group had the advantage of connecting in person with other Unity gamemakers in the scene, while also benefiting from the global community of Unity gamemakers facilitated by the company Unity Technologies. This example demonstrates how the game industry will tether local game production scenes to its products to accumulate potential users via in-person meetups and retain current users via localized support and community building on social media platforms, like Slack.<sup>54</sup> This two-pronged approach underlines how game industry companies like Unity Technologies recognize the value of local game production scenes and ensure they will continue to be tethered to their product into the future. Though Unity was not the first nor the simplest tool for gamemakers to access and use, Unity has been the most effective at developing a genre of cultural production within the scene and beyond.

The defining feature of any gamemaking scene is its ability to make games, and the Toronto scene is very effective at providing gamemakers with the space and resources to do so. Companies like Unity have become extremely effective at enticing gamemakers to use their editor by providing free training workshops and resources to make Unity games in the Toronto scene.<sup>55</sup> As other companies catch on to this trend, there will be more and more gamemaking scenes tethered to game production tools. This trend becomes increasingly important for gamemakers as they not only navigate the benefits and drawbacks of using a game editor and participate in its respective community, but also traverse the end-user license agreements and restrictions placed on using these digital tools in a society that increasingly promotes the creation and distribution of media within creative economies. And as these companies begin to control the way games are produced and disseminated, local not-for-profit organizations will have to develop new ways to resist the adoption of industry cultural norms and practices in how games are made.

# Conclusion

For cultural studies, examining scenes as palimpsests provides the framework for analyzing the cultural production of media by tracing the hypotexts of hypertexts and the paratexts that connect them together. As was demonstrated, the architextuality of hashtags, links, retweets, replies, and threads on social media like Twitter and Slack enable us to trace and understand how documents and discourses emerge in the scene. Many of these documents come to embody the behavioral protocols and actions of scene members, while others demonstrate the production of games from its cultural activities, like game jams. Ethnographers of scenes rely heavily on interviews, observations, and copies of ephemeral documents to piece together the locations, cultural activities, and genres of production within a scene. Other researchers examining historical scenes rely on private archives and oral histories to piece together these important accounts in understanding the development of infrastructure and culture in urban environments.

In this article, I have demonstrated how the textuality of social media can be used as a method to trace the histories of scenes and to contextualize broader linkages between geographic localities and globalized industries, movements, and genres. By focusing on the hypertextuality of scenes and how its participants inscribe their norms and practices via social media like Twitter and Slack, we can see how members discover and discuss the activities of the scene. In current scenes, like the Toronto game production scene, the embeddedness of social media and other forms of virtual interaction have enabled scenes to simultaneously broaden out their memberships by signposting its activities on the internet while also creating memberships gated behind Slack and Discord channels. This shift to the virtual materialities of scenes has given researchers the opportunity to triangulate and tabulate members and participants of activities, contextualize simultaneous events within the scene as was the case with the Torontaru incident, and to also capture the documentation of knowledge as can be found in the Slack channels and developer forums supporting local game production.

More importantly, the notion of looking at scenes as palimpsests helps us examine many of the tensions of scenes. In the case of the Toronto Unity Developer meetup, we see the corporatization of grassroots cultures. In other examples from my ethnography, organizations like the Hand Eye Society, Bento Miso, and Dames Making Games offer workshops and talks from representatives at Autodesk and Yoyo Games, the developers of the 3D modeling software Maya and the GameMaker engine, which highlights how several industry companies find ways to tether themselves to the local scene. We also see the blending of local norms with global industry practices, as found in the case of TOJam with the performance of crunch-like working conditions and games published on game distribution platforms like itch.io. One wonders how many of these small, first drafts of

games have gone on to be published on larger commercial platforms, like Valve Corporation's Steam, with the TOJam logo of a goat-on-a-pole incorporated into the artwork or play mechanics of the game.

Looking at scenes as palimpsests reveals how local politics of the scene can spill over onto social media, documenting many of the same issues of "ludopolitics" we see across the wider game industry.<sup>56</sup> Though the scene still relies upon word-of-mouth for gamemakers to know about the various gamemaking happenings, events, and activities, it has become increasingly virtual, not just as a place for information to be posted, but as a space where conversations about gamemaking and the production of games are debated and legitimized. Together, these tensions only emerge as the scene increasingly becomes material and tethered to wider industry norms and practices, underlining some of the ways through which local game production interacts with the wider game industry.

And finally, examining scenes as palimpsests alters how we perceive and define local cultural production. Notions of the local have typically been conceived along axis of scale and space, limiting our frameworks to geographical notions of size and physical place. This dichotomous framework situates the local as a small, urban environment or national industry, against a large, networked global industry. Arjun Appadurai's emphasis on the relational and contextual, constituted by a community's sense of social immediacy, technologies of interaction, and relativity of contexts, suggests a way forward. This does not mean that geographical definitions should be abandoned in conceiving the local scene. Rather, we untether our perception that networked communication technologies are exclusively global. David Nieborg, Chris J. Young, and Daniel Joseph examined how, out of the top 100 mobile games in the Apple App Store, the Silicon Valley region in California was responsible for producing 49 games in 2015, 36 in 2016, and 25 in 2017.<sup>57</sup> As the top 100 mobile games on the App Store account for approximately eighty-five percent of total direct revenue, the Silicon Valley region can be viewed as a key center and influencer of the global game industry. From this perspective, the global game industry is largely the local cultural production of a few geographical places or scenes. As such, the global is merely the sum of its localities, defined by how gamemakers and communities within local scenes inscribe its cultural norms and practices upon the wider scene and extended global industry via virtual technologies of interactivity. Taken further, scene tracing the hypertextuality of participants and cultural activities reveals how some localities replicate global movements, genres, and industry, and how others resist and transform to define their own norms and practices in the cultural production of global media.

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with asset kits so gamemakers can create specific genres of games without having to produce all the scripts and assets themselves. For example, gamemakers can download the Creator Kit: RPG to create the basic game functionality of a role-playing game within a couple of hours using the Unity Learn project tutorial, <https://learn.unity.com/project/creator-kit-rpg> < <https://learn.unity.com/project/creator-kit-rpg>> . ↵

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[View all of Chris J. Young's articles.](#)

Chris J. Young, "Scene Tracing: The Replication and Transformation of Global Industry, Movements, and Genres in Local Game Production," *Lateral* 11.1 (2022).

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## Alter Egoing: The Shifting Affects of Janelle Monáe

by Larissa Irizarry | Randy Martin Prize, Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

**ABSTRACT** In this article, I use alter egoing as a heuristic, a method for solving the problem of the evolving alter egos of Black women in popular music. When alter egos are analyzed through this lens, the refashioning of artistic imaginaries become legible as intellectual labor. The intellectual labor that Janelle Monáe primarily provides are critiques of notions of womanhood and Blackness in the United States. I understand Monáe's alter egoing as a reaction to the affective political strategies mobilized in US electoral politics. Former President Barack Obama developed an affective strategy based on his personal brand of optimism, first presented in his book *The Audacity of Hope* (2006). He developed his signature optimistic politics while he was a senator and he continued to promote his "audacious hopefulness" into his 2008 presidential campaign. Former President Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign also utilized an affective political strategy, as he rallied his supporters around culturally white (male) nostalgia with the cry, "Make America Great Again." I track the affective evolution of Monáe's alter egoing from pessimism to optimism in the context of the anti-Black populisms of the post-Obama era (2016–), culminating in a close reading of her 2018 album, *Dirty Computer*. In identifying Monáe's troubled relationship with notions of normative identity through her first alter ego, I evaluate the relevance of posthumanism and Afrofuturism, which scholars have used to critique American notions of race, gender, and sexuality. In analyzing the shift in affect from her first alter ego to her most recent, I detect in Monáe's alter egoing a critical optimism, a disidentifying strategy that begins to take shape in *Dirty Computer*.

**KEYWORDS** Black feminism, queer, Afropessimism, Afrofuturism, alter egos

"Who is Cindi Mayweather?" the CNET interviewer asks Janelle Monáe.<sup>1</sup> Monáe takes a dramatic pause, slowly turns to face the camera, as though attached to a dolly, mechanically pivoting towards the audience, and she says in monotone, "Hello, I am Janelle Monáe." Her face softens, her natural timbre returns, "and also Cindi Mayweather . . . I am half human, part droid."<sup>2</sup> This performative tactic in interviews is characteristic of Janelle Monáe's public self-presentation across a career that spans almost two decades. It has historically been difficult to separate the android alter ego from Janelle Monáe the person.

The already porous boundary between Monáe and Cindi Mayweather is further muddled when she explains to interviewers that, "I only date androids."<sup>3</sup>

I've been intrigued by Janelle Monáe's ambiguous relationship to the convoluted narrative of her android alter ego since her 2007 debut EP, but it was the 2018 refashioning of her alter ego in *Dirty Computer* that instigated my study of alter egos.<sup>4</sup> When I watched the nearly fifty-minute visual album for the first time, I remember being struck by the distinct, almost jarring shift in Monáe's persona from her previous albums, from the physically rigid yet frenetic Cindi to the sensuously punk Jane57821. As I familiarized myself with Jane57821 of *Dirty Computer* and compared her with the android Cindi Mayweather of the *Metropolis Suites* I knew so well (as a longtime fan), I detected a choreographed evolution in Monáe's affective strategy, or what I call *alter egoing*.<sup>5</sup>

In my work on Black women in popular music, I use alter egoing as a heuristic, a method for solving the problem of the shifting, evolving, and unstable personality or persona. When such alternate personalities or personas are analyzed through the lens of alter egoing, the refashioning of artistic imaginaries—by which I mean the world-building connected to the alter ego through implied backstories and identifiable narrative—become legible as intellectual labor. The intellectual labor that Monáe primarily provides are critiques of notions of womanhood and Blackness in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Before I continue, it is important to note that I make a distinction between the alter egos used in Janelle Monáe's *Metropolis Suites* and in *Dirty Computer*. The alter ego Cindi Mayweather, in my analysis, belongs to the *Metropolis Suites*, which include an EP released in 2007, and her two following albums released in 2010 and 2013.<sup>7</sup> Although used somewhat interchangeably with Cindi Mayweather in these earlier albums, I locate the Jane57821 alter ego in the 2018 visual album *Dirty Computer* in order to delineate what I perceive as a shift in alter egoing.<sup>8</sup>

I understand Monáe's alter egoing as a reaction to the affective political strategies mobilized in electoral politics in the United States, the transformation of her alter egos indicative of shared, social feelings that evolve according to contemporary political events.<sup>9</sup> Former President Barack Obama developed an affective strategy based on his personal brand of optimism, first presented in his book *The Audacity of Hope* (the title of which is an adaptation from Jeremiah Wright's 1988 sermon "Audacity to Hope").<sup>10</sup> He developed his signature optimistic, hopeful politics while he was a senator and he continued to promote his "audacious hopefulness" into his 2008 presidential campaign. Former President Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign also utilized an affective political strategy, as he rallied his supporters around culturally white (male) nostalgia with the cry, "Make America Great Again."<sup>11</sup>

In this article, I track the affective evolution of Monáe's *alter egoing* from pessimism to optimism in the context of the anti-Black populisms of the post-Obama era (2016–), culminating in a close reading of her 2018 album, *Dirty Computer* in the context of Trumpian nostalgia (signified by his campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again"). I first explore Cindi Mayweather's relationship to race, gender, and sexuality. The sonic and visual aesthetics of the *Metropolis Suites* expose the racialized and queer features of the seemingly post-race heteronormative Cindi Mayweather. In identifying Cindi Mayweather's troubled relationship with notions of normative identity (read, white cis-heterosexuality), I will evaluate the relevance of posthumanism and Afrofuturism, which scholars have used to critique American notions of race, gender, and sexuality. I conclude by noting the pros and cons of strategies that rely on either universality or specificity. I will offer *critical optimism* as an alternative, a strategy that Monáe begins to construct through her alter egoing in *Dirty Computer*.

From the lyrics of Monáe's songs (e.g. "Mr. President") to the visuals of her visual albums (e.g. "Pynk's" intertextual critique of Trump's infamous "grab them by the pussy" comment), a calculated shift in affect emerged contemporaneously with the election of the first Black president of the United States and the cultural backlash to his election. The significance of this chronology is the contemporaneous emergence of rhetorics of white (male) nostalgia, propelled by anti-Black populisms. As I investigate the evolution of Monáe's alter egoing, I argue that her most recent affective strategy, critical optimism, is a strategic update from her prior Afropessimist orientation.

## Cindi Mayweather as All-inclusive Heroine or Racialized Subject

"Who is Cindi Mayweather?" This is one of the most frequently asked questions of Janelle Monáe and of her music, to which she almost as frequently responds that Cindi represents, "all who are marginalized."<sup>12</sup> Mobilizing the supposed universality of an alien android, Monáe crafted an alter ego to meet the need for non-normative representation in American popular music. In this same spirit, Monáe explains that her use of the nickname "Q.U.E.N.," (for herself and her "electric lady" cohort of her 2013 album), is an acronym for "the queer community, untouchables, emigrants, excommunicated and those labeled negroid."<sup>13</sup> Monáe's use of the android emphasizes her project to be an all-inclusive heroine, an attempt to be relevant to whoever considered themselves not represented by contemporary popular music artists.<sup>14</sup> Cindi Mayweather, by default, featured a lack of specificity that, in some ways, blunted the subversive nature of the alter egoing. Media scholar Dan Hassler-Forest addresses what he sees as neoliberal maneuvering. Although ultimately evaluating her work as helping consumers and fans think beyond the confines of

capitalist realism, Hassler-Forest ascribes much of Mon  e's success to her compatibility with the cultural logic of neoliberal capitalism. I argue further that this approach can be understood as a neoliberal maneuver shaped by Obamian hopefulness, a post-race optimism.

Cindi Mayweather's all-inclusive marginality via the metaphor of the android belies a commentary on Blackness. In the song "Violet Stars, Happy Hunting!!!" Cindi Mayweather sings:

I'm a slave girl without a race  
On the run cause they're here to erase  
And chase out my kind.

Despite this nominal denial of race, Janelle Mon  e circumvents the post-racial rhetoric with an analogy: an android illegally in love with a human. Because of her illegal intimacies, Cindi Mayweather is sentenced for disassembly. She's forcibly sent back to our time and becomes a messiah figure known as the ArchAndroid.

A prime example of the subtextual racialization of Cindi Mayweather can be found in *The Metropolis* hit single "Many Moons." The entire music video revolves around an event that is a cross between a concert, a fashion show, and an auction. The event is introduced by the auctioneer as "The Annual Android Auction." As she begins to describe the androids for sale, she is accompanied by a lyrical orchestral string melody set against a guitar plucking a descending bass tetrachord. The instrumentation and melody do not particularly signify Blackness, however, an assortment of horns enter on the fifth repetition of the descending tetrachord with an ascending fifth and an electric organ becomes a part of the instrumentation soon thereafter; these shifts in instrumentation gesture towards 1960s big band, with a twist of Black church and funk.

Clones of Cindi Mayweather await their turn to walk the auction runway in their various costumes and wigs. The original Cindi Mayweather, "The Alpha Platinum 9000," steps onto the center stage that is flanked by the runway. The bidding begins. She and her bandmates begin their performance for the auction patrons as she watches her likeness being bought and sold. What could conjure a neo-slave narrative more than rows of Cindi Mayweather androids lining up to walk the auction block?<sup>15</sup>

In "Many Moons," Cindi literally performs race. Before mounting the music stage overlooking the humanoid products for sale, Cindi, her android body a synthetic pearly white, pushes a button located at her temple and suddenly her white visage switches to a natural melanated hue (see Figure 1). In a literal sense, race is a technology Cindi uses to fulfill her prescribed role as racialized musical entertainer. Furthermore, she uses Black musical topoi, Black stereotypes, and queer Black language. Funk grooves and rap breaks

tie Cindi Mayweather to the urban Black American music. When she sings “we eat wangs and throw them bones on the ground,” she takes pride in a Southern Black heritage. Despite the claim that Cindi Mayweather is ambiguously marginalized, her marginality is further specified by the lyrics “serving face” (in the song “Q.U.E.E.N.”), which connects her to queer Blackness, a preview of Monáe’s coming out as a queer Black woman a decade later.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Picture1.png> >



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Picture2.png> >

Figure 1. Cindi Mayweather before and after switching on her Black skin prior to the Annual Android Auction in the “Many Moons” music video.

Monáe’s elision of race, with a protagonist that both explicitly refuses to comment on race and at the same time be so transparently consumed by it, spoke to the political moment in which some Black people found themselves during an era of supposed color blindness. Ellis Cashmore, in his work on celebrity and Beyoncé, maintains that, “After 11 September 2001, Americans became more preoccupied with emphasizing their similarities rather than differences.”<sup>16</sup> The lyrics and musical topoi in the *Metropolis Suites*, and in “Many Moons” in particular, subvert Cindi Mayweather’s claim of all-inclusive, post-racial identity. Thus, Cindi Mayweather attempts to circulate in an Obama world of supposed post-raciality, and yet her subtextual connection to Blackness belies her gestures towards universality.

From *Metropolis* to *Dirty Computer*, Monáe uses what Faedra Chatard Carpenter calls “whiteface.” Carpenter theorizes six types of whiteface: tinted whiteface, optic whiteface, nonconforming whiteface, naturalized whiteface, linguistic whiteface, and presumed aural whiteface.<sup>17</sup> Before Cindi Mayweather turns on her Blackness in “Many Moons,” she could be said to be performing optic whiteface. Carpenter defines optic whiteface as the absence of color—a performed whiteness that is visually opaque, paintlike, and bright white. “Many Moons” demonstrates optic whiteface, as does Beyoncé’s 2013 song “Mine” in which she cradles the head of a person whose entire body is painted synthetic white (see Figure 2).





<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Picture3.png>

Figure 2. Beyoncé in the music video "Mine" from Beyoncé (2013) cradling the head of someone whose entire body is painted synthetic white, enacting optic whiteface, a racial performance that is only further emphasized by the whiteface mask in Beyoncé's left hand.

By contrast, tinted whiteface is featured in Monáe's "Q.U.E.E.N." from *The Electric Lady* (2013), another song from the Metropolis Trilogy. Carpenter defines tinted whiteface as an intentionally unnatural racial performance that "underscores the constructed nature of imagined whiteness, thereby suggesting the possibility of racial mixture and/or the impossibility of racial purity."<sup>18</sup> The music video for this song first starts with a monologue delivered by a sonically white speaker (later confirmed by their appearance on a monitor) accompanied by classical western art music diegetically playing in the background. We are introduced to a museum, the "Living Museum, where legendary rebels throughout history are frozen in suspended animation," an obvious reference to Cindi's ArchAndroid ability to time travel. The camera cuts to the suspended rebels, the first frames resting on the bodies of two figures covered in white, chalky powder (see Figure 3).



<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Picture4.png>

Figure 3. Two rebels frozen in suspended animation, enacting tinted whiteface in the music video "Q.U.E.E.N." from Janelle Monáe's *The Electric Lady* (2013).



As Cindi gets ready to take to the stage in "Many Moons," she turns off her optic whiteface and powers on her Blackness. She then frantically dances between styles that allude to James Brown, Michael Jackson, and Prince. Just as she literally turns on her Blackness to become who the audience expects her to be, she desperately negotiates between performance signifiers of Blackness as though she must be all Black stereotypes to all people.

Musicologist Nina Sun Eidsheim theorizes what it means for a voice to "be Black" in America. According to Eidsheim's formulation, the voice is collective, the voice is cultural, and the voice's source comes from the listener. In other words, the voice is defined solely outside of itself.<sup>19</sup> The audio-vocal dialectic, wherein the voice is constructed only in terms of how it is understood by the listener, is what Eidsheim calls the "thick event." "Many Moons" sonically evokes Blackness through this dialectic, but also with the instrumentation that plays in the background while the auctioneer introduces the android product.<sup>20</sup> Once Cindi Mayweather does start to sing, the homorhythmic vocal harmonies that join her stylistically gesture towards gospel choir, but this is an inference primarily made by the audience who looks upon the choir of droids, rows of Cindi Mayweather look-alikes, accompanied by a keyboard set to electric organ, adding to the thick event that is sonic Black church. The cultural constructedness of sonic and visual Blackness is further emphasized by rows of identical Cindi androids flanked in organized formation behind the auction stage, waiting to be sold. They sing in a chordal texture "Your freedom's in a bind." They project their sentiment outward, but it is an obvious indictment of their own servitude to the bourgeois non-droid flesh bodies that have purchasing power over their android selves.

The troubled nature and clear dissonance of the emotion picture whole—the music, vocality, and lyrics—work to complicate Cindi Mayweather's message and blur the distinction between the alter ego and the artist, Janelle Monáe. Through Cindi Mayweather, Monáe circumvented post-racial rhetoric with a metaphor too thin to veil its true meaning. Monáe's creation of a story concerning the illegality of love between android and human is an obvious metaphor for the historical restriction of miscegenation, the interbreeding of people considered to be of different races, in the United States. In contemporary times, the story of Cindi Mayweather is a commentary on the regulation of non-normative people and their intimate attachments.

# Cindi Mayweather's Subversion through Queer Dandyism

Cindi Mayweather, and consequently Monáe herself, has been understood by some fans and scholars as adhering to respectability politics.<sup>21</sup> The main evidence offered as support for this stance is her modest mode of dress: a black and white suit (see Figure 4). In this line of argument, her austere dress and the absence of sexually explicit lyrics in her music form a meaningful contrast with such unrespectable, "ratchet" artists as Nicki Minaj and Cardi B.<sup>22</sup>



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Picture5.png> >

Figure 4. Janelle Monáe (or Cindi Mayweather) in the "Many Moons" music video, dressed in her iconic black and white suit.

Even though Monáe has explicitly disavowed respectability, her early alter egoing through Cindi Mayweather appears to blur the boundary between respectability and disrespectability politics, destabilizing the binary rather than entirely overturning it. Inscribing respectability politics onto Monáe presupposes heterosexuality and monogamy, two social norms that Cindi Mayweather in fact never overtly contradicts (though these norms are later directly flouted by Monáe's Jane57821).<sup>23</sup> Cindi Mayweather's assumed monogamy and the heteronormative presentation of her romantic attachment may unwittingly align Monáe's early alter egoing with homonormativity, a queer kind of respectability.<sup>24</sup>

Respectability politics has been a useful strategy of survival for Black Americans in the United States, but, to summarize Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Black women's adherence to respectability does not promise freedom from oppression. Aisha Durham, Brittney C.

Cooper, and Susana M. Morris identify the potential political progress that is undercut by respectability politics because of its employment of surveillance, control, and repression that reinscribes white capitalist heteropatriarchy.<sup>25</sup> Understanding respectability politics as an instrument of heteronormative regulation and homonormative self-regulation, Carmel Ohman goes so far as to call respectability politics an anti-Black and misogynist disciplinary mechanism, a *misogynoir* mechanism.<sup>26</sup>

Aside from Monáe's explicit denial of respectability politics and her accusation of such a label as an attempt to police her queer Blackness, features of her alter egoing counter the premises of respectability. First, respectability politics was used to differentiate "proper" middle class Black people from the poor working class. Monáe's signature black and white is worn as an homage to the poor working class, by evoking the uniform used by those in service industries.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the tux that Monáe dons contradicts respectability's heteronormative regulation through its temporally queer and gender-ambiguous references. Although Monáe is femme-presenting for most of the awards season, Cindi Mayweather's various black and white outfits mix styles from eighteenth-century fashion to 1950s fashion, and the cut of the tuxes lean towards a soft butch or stud aesthetic.

Monáe's early signature look is an essential key to understanding her subversive, queer nature that was not made explicit until the release of *Dirty Computer*. Her mode of dress aligns with a queer icon of the 1930s, another Black performer known for her gender-queer costume of the suit, Gladys Bentley. Bentley's use of the suit, which has been anachronistically labelled as queer, is connected to the practice of Black dandyism. A. J. Hamilton describes Black dandyism as a "sartorial aesthetic rooted in fine clothing and tailoring, a cosmopolitan sensibility, and a sophisticated affinity for culture and art" which practically materialized as the three-piece suit.<sup>28</sup> Black dandyism was used by early twentieth-century Black men to combat harmful stereotypes. Through their dandyism, Black men exhibited refinement and cosmopolitanism in hopes to dispel the belief that they were by default uneducated and savage. Their mode of dress and specifically the perceived all-consuming interest in their own lovely masculinity was hoped to give the impression to onlookers of a lack of interest in women, which worked against the rapacious Black man stereotype.

This very brief summary of Black dandyism seems to apply more readily to the frequent musical collaborator of Wondaland, the "classic man" Jidenna, than to Monáe herself. However, according to Hamilton's study on the semiotics of the suit, Black dandyism, and the queering of it by Black women, has its own resistance history. It is important to note that the masculine strategy of Black dandyism was firmly situated in the practice of critical race theorists, or "race men." The critical race studies canon is populated by such Black dandies as W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and in contemporary times, Cornel West. Black

women are implicitly erased in West's belief that access to agency and freedom from marginalization is obtained by way of the dress and demeanor of the "Victorian male"<sup>29</sup> Within this visual rhetoric that aligns suited masculinity with epistemological prowess, Monáe's sartorial wearing of the suit queers this strategy and carves a distinct space for deviant participation in Black intellectual elitism. Furthermore, both of these women's mixture of icons—Bentley's pairing of the top hat and suit with a skirt and heels, and Monáe's mix of eighteenth-century and 1950s fashion—calls attention to the "process of reading and being read."<sup>30</sup> This queering of Black dandyism is an oppositional gaze of sorts that at once returns the Black dandy gaze upon itself and forces acknowledgement of female dandies.

Another of Hamilton's astute observations of Bentley provides insight into the emancipatory potential of Cindi Mayweather's suited alter egoing: "Her dandyism rejected the dominant fashion culture's primitivist fetishization of the Black female body and rejected the Black intelligentsia's view of racial progress as a masculine-centered endeavor."<sup>31</sup> In the spirit of Bentley's co-option of the three-piece suit as both rejecting the current culture's fetishization of the Black female body and refusing the Harlem Renaissance's male-centric view of racial progress, Monáe maintains that she will not be restricted by heterosexist norms and that her music serves to "[weed] out folks who tried to place me in their little, safe category."<sup>32</sup> Respectability is one of those safe categories, which her mode of dress contradicts, as her iconic black and white suit pays homage to service workers and participates in queer dandyism.

## Cindi Mayweather and the Implicit Whiteness of Posthumanism

Monáe's practice of using an otherworldly alter ego in the *Metropolis Suites* and its alien androgyny forces her into dialogue with posthumanism, with white queer artists and their alien alter egos, and with male Afrofuturist alter egos. Monáe's reliance on the alien android connects her to posthumanist discourse, particularly Donna Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto." Posthumanism, and specifically Haraway's cyberfeminism, subconsciously presupposes whiteness in its reliance on universalizing rhetoric. Haraway suggests that feminists should move beyond naturalism and essentialism, criticizing feminist tactics as "identity politics" that victimize those excluded, and she proposes that it is better strategically to confuse identities.<sup>33</sup> Haraway's unmarked whiteness allows her to call for the non-essentialized metaphor of the cyborg in the name of coalition.<sup>34</sup> Haraway's cyborg morphology comes at great cost (most notably the erasure of Afrofuturism) for women of color who rely on Black sisterhoods and afro-ancestral lineages and mythologies.

Cindi Mayweather's alter egoing is also imperfectly grouped with white artists who use alien alter egos. I've already noted the ways that Cindi Mayweather's heteronormative, "respectable" presentation is subverted by subtle signifiers of queerness. Cindi Mayweather is further removed from heteronormativity by her otherworldly, alien nature. Cindi's alienness aligns her with the queer practice of such artists as avant-garde countertenor Klaus Nomi and glam rocker David Bowie. In the words of author Alex Benson,

The alien metaphor repackages a queer experience for mass consumption in a straight world—a red herring encasing a secret message to social misfits everywhere. It wraps aesthetic intention around behaviors and body language usually mocked. It's not gay, it's avant-garde.<sup>35</sup>

Cindi Mayweather's connection to white gender-bending figures is a one-dimensional link. These figures (Nomi and Bowie) needed the alien metaphor to operate in a straight world. Monáe, a queer Black woman, contrived an alien, android alter ego that is as oppressed in Metropolis as her creator is in the real world.

Despite the critical difference between a white man's androgyny and Monáe's intersectional queering of the alter ego, it isn't hard to see the similarities between David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust and Janelle Monáe's Cindi Mayweather: they both figure as messiah, they both bring a message of hope through song, they both come from another planet, they both are queer subjects. The key difference between Ziggy Stardust and Cindi Mayweather is the subtextual Du Boisian struggle of the *Metropolis Suites*.

Although futuristic alter egos (specifically from the 1970s funk and glam rock scene) have functioned as a way to create alternate realities that are hospitable to queer bodies and temporalities—such as George Clinton's Starchild and Dr. Funkenstein, Lou Reed's the Phantom of Rock, and the aforementioned Ziggy Stardust—the reality crafted for Cindi Mayweather is not a hospitable world free of oppression. Janelle Monáe's alter egoing does not create a more inclusive world, but rather, illuminates the injustices of the real world. Cindi Mayweather did not function as a suspension of reality but an emphasis of the universality of violence on all "those who are marginalized."<sup>36</sup>

Earlier iterations of alter egos, especially from the funk and glam genres, function as performative affirmations of post-human identity, but at this early stage of Monáe's alter egoing such affirmation was not a part of her world-building schema in the *Metropolis Suites*. Contrary to Monáe's claim to all-inclusive representation, I argue that the story of Cindi Mayweather emphasizes how Black women do not or are not able to perform separate from their intersectional identities, alter egos notwithstanding. Cindi's narrative subverts oppressive forces by exposing its violence, both subtle and extreme.

Thus, Cindi the alien android circulates in what would seem to be the Obama world of Janelle Monáe, with alter egoing that responds to the supposed post-raciality of the United States in her self-denial of the racialized body, and yet she is unable to uncouple herself from racialization. The tenuous omission of race from Janelle Monáe's first version of alter egoing in turn becomes an Afropessimist commentary on the negation of the Black body.<sup>37</sup> Monáe expressed universality through the android narrative, and yet preserved her own Blackness by using examples of oppression specific to her community.

## Cindi Mayweather's Afropessimist Political Affect

Afropessimism has a couple of different definitions. Scholar of African American studies Frank Wilderson describes Afropessimism as a theoretical positioning of Black people as structural props, with the sole purpose of fulfilling white and non-Black fantasies.<sup>38</sup> Cindi Mayweather's purported universality is strangely wedded to both sonic and visual signifiers of Blackness, a coupling that invokes a pessimism that seems to suggest that not all oppression is analogous to anti-Blackness. Cindi Mayweather's cognitive dissonance thus becomes a metaphor for how Black people are "positioned, contained, and punished, both excluded from and necessary to the category of the Human."<sup>39</sup> I understand this form of alter egoing as not just promoting Afropessimism, but a politicized affect, an affective strategy stemming from Afropessimism, an Afropessimist orientation that contrasts with Obama's audacious, hopeful optimism.

In politicizing the term affect, most obviously in the use of the terms "political affect," I call on Jennifer C. Nash's definition of affect as, "how bodies are organized around intensities, longings, desires, temporalities, repulsions, curiosities, fatigues, optimism, and how these affects produce political movements (or sometimes inertias)."<sup>40</sup> To reiterate, Obama developed his own brand of affect, a signature optimistic politics to which Monáe's alter egoing reacts. Thus, the evolution of Cindi Mayweather demonstrates how shared, social feelings evolve according to contemporary political events.<sup>41</sup>

Cindi Mayweather's assessment of freedom in "Many Moons," with the lyrics "Your freedom's in a bind," strikes a dissonant chord in what some have called the era of post-race audacious hopefulness in America. The dissonance increased with the crucial rise in awareness of police brutality only weeks into Obama's administration. In January 2009, in Oakland, California Johannes Mehserle, a transit officer, shot the 22-year-old unarmed Black man Oscar Grant. The brutality of the murder of a young man, handcuffed and lying face down on the public transportation platform, extinguished much of the optimism generated from the Democratic win of the White House. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes in *The Guardian*:

The optimism that coursed through Black America in 2008 seemed a million miles away . . . . As for President Obama, he turned out to be very different from candidate Obama, who had stage-managed his campaign to resemble something closer to a social movement. He had conjured much hope, especially among African Americans—but with great expectations came even greater disappointments.<sup>42</sup>

Having a Black president does not automatically eradicate racism in the United States or validate the claim that America is post-racial, a fact emphasized by the widely publicized murder of a Black man at the hands of a white man. In an obvious address to the contemporary political environment that proved the fallacy of a post-racial America, Cindi Mayweather pleads in her song “Mr. President,” singing,

Hey Mr. President,  
Don't you see the hurt in their eyes?  
So much disappointment in many faces  
Use your heart and not your pride  
We can't go on and keep pretending.

Despite the critique that Cindi Mayweather is a protagonist packaged for the masses, her obvious critique of Obama, a Black man who has become a beacon of hope to many aspiring people of color, counters the idea that she is a mere neoliberal cog in the American political landscape. Black women have been traditionally discouraged from bringing Black men to task due to “the indignities of life in a racist society,” as explained by Kimberlé Crenshaw, and they’ve been encouraged to “protect the home against assaults outside the home.”<sup>43</sup> Where Black women have been discouraged from harshly critiquing Black men because of America’s system of racism that is swift to accuse, sentence, and incarcerate Black men, Cindi Mayweather provides a fair critique that neither takes away from Obama’s feat of becoming the first non-white president, nor skirts around his neglect of those who have been negatively impacted during his tenure.

## Jane57821’s Critical Optimism in Response to White (Male) Nostalgia

Some criticisms of Afropessimism include its nominal pessimistic bent and its US-centrism. It is contended that Afropessimism subverts the kind of actionable hope that builds the coalition needed in the fight against anti-Blackness. Afropessimism tends to conflate Blackness and the history of chattel slavery in the US, thus erasing other Black freedom struggles that do not stem from US history of slavery.<sup>44</sup> In my invocation of critical optimism, I do not intend to disable the utility of Afropessimism. In my analysis of Jane57821, I understand Monáe’s critical optimism as informed by the Afropessimist tradition but reacting to the pull of politicized affects in the Obama/post-Obama era. It is

interesting that just as Monáe became more specific in her alter egoing via *Dirty Computer*'s Jane57821, with such lyrics as "Black girl magic," she promotes an orientation of critical optimism, which stands in contrast to Cindi Mayweather's Afropessimism.

Political culture is intertwined with affect (e.g. shame evoked by President Bush's response to Hurricane Katrina). The evolution of Monáe's alter egoing maps the affective terrain of the Obama/post-Obama era. The shift from Cindi Mayweather to Jane57824 happened simultaneously with the shift in rhetorics of hope and nostalgia circulating in electoral politics and seemed to expose how these politicized affects align some subjects and antagonize others.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Monáe's shift from Afropessimism in the era of Obamian optimism to critical optimism during a time of acute white (male) nostalgia exposes how emotions move between body-politics.

Whereas Cindi Mayweather acted as an Afropessimist critique of Obama's audacious hope and belief in America as post-racial, Jane57821 confronts Trump's white (male) nostalgia with critical optimism. Critical optimism is an affective strategy that stands in contrast to the US political affective context of nostalgia for the past and pessimistic mourning for the future.

The performative political practice of critical optimism that I theorize through Monáe's alter going is influenced by Leboeuf's interrogation of Obama's audacious hope, Berlant's analysis of political affect and genre, and Snediker's queer optimism.<sup>46</sup> In combining these theories, I understand *alter egoing* as the practice of crafting a unique narrative wherein artists who are Black women can defy the futures and outcomes that have been designated to them.

The function of Monáe's alter egoing shifts from Cindi Mayweather to Jane57821 as her oeuvre matures from the *Metropolis Suites* to *Dirty Computer*. The postmodern, intertextual complexity of the *Metropolis Suites*, which references cultural works as wide-ranging as the 1928 German expressionist film *Metropolis* to Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), are again present in *Dirty Computer*. These references range from Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* to speeches by Malcom X and Martin Luther King.<sup>47</sup> By way of alter egoing, Monáe negotiates pessimism and optimism through intimate stories of state-condemned deviance and the violence of surveillance.

A decade after the release of the EP *Metropolis*, Monáe refurbished her alter ego into Jane57821, the protagonist of her 2018 album and short film *Dirty Computer* (Figure 5). Instead of a technological android that is sentenced for disassembly, Jane57821 refuses to follow the rules of an authoritarian government and is consequently captured and her memories, deleted. In the *Metropolis Suites*, the narrative of deviancy and punishment is associated with Cindi's lack of a human body, whereas in the case of Jane, her very human,



is implicated, even with an entire song dedicated to her deviant vagina. In short, Cindi Mayweather is universal insofar as she uses race as a technology to meet the expectations of those around her. Jane57821, on the other hand, is “highly melanated,” fleshy and specific, one-hundred percent authentic “Black girl magic.”<sup>48</sup> Emphasizing Jane57821’s body as “highly melanated” and labelling her flesh a “dirty computer” puts Monáe’s most recent alter ego in direct conversation with Afropessimism’s heuristic strategy of diagnosing how Black folks are excluded from and a necessary to the category of the human in a white supremacist world.

48:37

Figure 5. “Emotion Picture” for *Dirty Computer* (2018).

“They started calling us computers,” Monáe’s disembodied voice informs us at the beginning of *Dirty Computer*, “People began vanishing and the cleaning began.” Instead of the mythic tale of time travel of the *Metropolis Suites*, *Dirty Computer* gives us an intimate story of dystopian erasure. In the ensuing plot, two white men analyze the “dirty” memories of Jane, a Black woman, and the cleansing they perform highlights an anxiety over her racial construction, her polyamorous sexuality, and gender expression. It is interesting that Cindi is implicated for her android body, whereas Jane is criminalized for her gender and sexuality, things that are so intimately tied to the flesh. And yet, as Jane is implicated for her fleshiness, she is condemned as a “dirty computer.” This seems to be an about-face from the expectations of the previous world in which Cindi was the criminal. It is as though Janelle Monáe, through these two iterations of her alter ego, is creating alternate worlds that express the damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don’t double bind of queer Black womanhood.<sup>49</sup> Monáe’s first EP was released just prior to the 2008 election, a time in which the election of the first Black president inspired post-racial, post-racist optimism.

*Dirty Computer* was released in a drastically different socio-political climate, with “MAGA” rhetoric, mounting white supremacist terrorism, and hyper visibility of police brutality.

In Monáe’s first studio album, *The ArchAndroid*, we learn that Cindi Mayweather is an android prototype being displayed at an auction where other androids of her model are being sold on the black-market to the highest bidder. In the *Metropolis Suites*, we traverse time and witness Cindi Mayweather use race as a technology to critique class oppression; the antagonists are racially diverse, but always bear upper class signifiers. Rather than time travel, *Dirty Computer* travels temporalities via Jane’s memories, and the function of these memories, rather than providing commentary on class difference, highlight her inescapable Blackness and her queer womanhood (or femaleness), both of which are under attack by the presiding totalitarian regime.

When we are first introduced to Jane57821, she is lying helpless on an inspection table. Through a loudspeaker, she is instructed, “You will repeat after me. Your [sic] name is Jane57821. I am a dirty computer. I am ready to be cleaned.” The voice over the loudspeaker is implicitly white, and so as Jane refuses to repeat the self-indicting phrase, we witness Janelle Monáe’s interpretation of Frantz Fanon’s “third-person consciousness” when he says in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man’s eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the [person] of color encounters difficulties in the development of [their] body schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness.<sup>50</sup>

The story goes on to follow two white men searching through Jane’s memories and deleting those that feature Black female eroticism and gender negotiation.

Janelle Monáe dropped “Django Jane,” the second single released from *Dirty Computer*, on February 22, 2018. The song visually positions Monáe as matriarch, monarch, general, and CEO. It is interesting, and a bit ironic, that this song, which puts “Black girl magic” on display and emphasizes Black woman empowerment visually and lyrically, comes from a place of felt precarity. When asked what inspired “Django Jane,” Monáe confides, “It was in response to me feeling the sting of the threats being made to my rights as a woman, as a Black woman, as a sexually liberated woman, even just as a daughter with parents who have been oppressed for many decades.”<sup>51</sup> In this statement Monáe rearticulates a concept that Fanon describes as living in “triple personhood” (different from third-person consciousness of the previous quote). This triple personhood is the burden of responsibility for one’s body, race, and ancestors. Monáe adds an additional layer of responsibility as her alter egoing is not relegated to the past or the present, but the future.

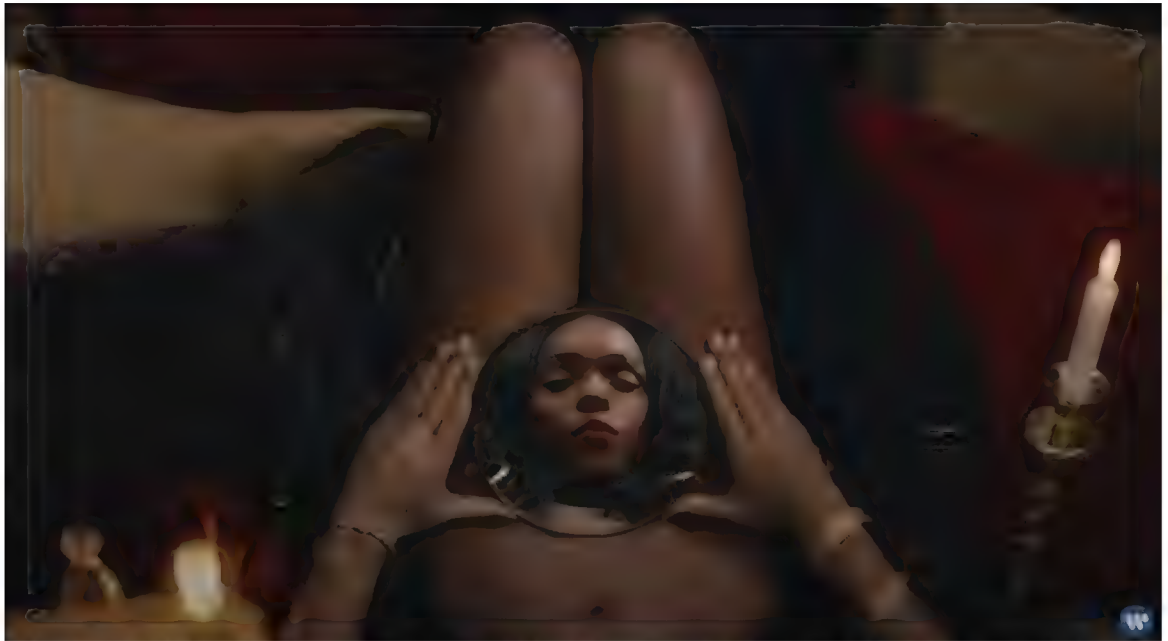
As our heroine raps in "Django Jane" she is surrounded by a posse of Black panther-like ladies. In a suit and heels, she sits atop a throne, her crown a kufi cap.

Jane57821 alter egoing articulates a strategy for navigating a world in triple personhood. Monáe's strategy differs from other rappers, such as Nicki Minaj and Cardi B who tend towards parody, irreverence and ratchetness.<sup>52</sup> Neither does Janelle Monáe entirely embody respectability politics, her suit and tie notwithstanding. Monáe blurs the lines between the ratchet and the respectable, producing a defiant, critical optimism.

Monáe's critical optimism operates on a belief in the inevitability of queer Black womanhood. On some level, this optimism of Black women's future despite the current oppression suffered is similar to Beyoncé's "Formation" music video. Both songs celebrate Black women, Black feminists, and Black feminism. They both include Black girl squads, with both singers as matriarch. Unlike "Formation," however, "Django Jane" speaks not of revenge or the power of money. Even though Django Jane starts the song with a list of tangible economic hurdles and feats, her main focus is the freedom of her female body. Jane ends the song with the command "Take a seat, you are not involved. Hit the mute button, let the vagina have a monologue." Cindi Mayweather uses her robotic dance moves and funk-infused grooves to subvert class oppression and to question normative sexual structures of intimacy, via allegory and metaphor. Jane57821 takes it a step further: she removes the veil and explicitly states that she is a Black girl from Kansas City, whose very body—her vagina and ability to give life—is being policed by men.

## Janelle Monáe and Her Flaw in Critical Optimism

Janelle Monáe takes the literalism—"let the vagina have a monologue"—one step further in another of Jane57821's memories under inspection, the song "Pynk." Two months after "Django Jane" was released, "Pynk" was uploaded to Janelle Monáe's YouTube channel. The lowlight, serious aura of "Django Jane" was exchanged for a pink infrared and ultra-femme aesthetic. The overall aesthetic and timbre of "Pynk" greatly contrast with "Django Jane." Janelle Monáe raps the entirety of "Django Jane," whereas in "Pynk" she sweetly sings in her upper middle register. These contrasts notwithstanding, the two songs are united by their vagina monologue motif. The vagina pants dance sequence in "Pynk" is in direct response to "Django Jane's" command, "let the vagina have a monologue" (see Figures 6 and 7). Although the album is dystopic, "Pynk" is brimming with erotic feminine and female metaphors that create a stark contrast to the dark subject matter that is the policing of women's bodies.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/randy-martin-prize-cover-photo-Larissa-Irizarry.jpg> >

Figure 6. The face of Janelle Monáe, as Jane57821, reflected in a mirror on her lap, as she delivers a "vagina monologue" in "Django Jane."



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Picture7.jpg> >

Figure 7. Vagina pants in the music video "Pynk."

The first musical texture in "Pynk" is a bodily act: snapping fingers. As a pink car comes to a stop at a motel, a woman stands to greet Jane57821, one arm akimbo, the other snapping twice. First, we see just one woman snap, but soon others join in. The meaning of the snap is dynamic. It can be used to signal a retort, or express approval. In *Dirty Computer*, snapping is a non-vocal musical expression. The finger snap is often a signifier of agency. Its allowance of participation empowers those who would rather not participate vocally. The snaps of the women at the Pynk motel are acts of communal response. But more than that,

the snapping of the fingers draws attention to tactility and gives way to the body surface as a theoretical medium. In looking at Black women's "disco embodiment/aesthetics," Samantha Pinto analyzes Black women's performative surfaces as ways to theorize Black feminist politics and finds new ways to "[imagine] a politics rooted not in reference to the official, formal spheres of political life—rights, law, public protest, etc.—but in the quotidian and the fantastic registers of Black women's embodied experiences and presences, in their surfaces themselves."<sup>53</sup> Like the Sharks' and Jets' attempt to "stay cool" amidst the gang conflict in *West Side Story* (1961), the snapping of the women in "Pynk" commands attention.

As these women press their fingers together and snap, we're given a close shot of the phrase "I grab back" stitched in pink on the front of a pair of white briefs. The song's endearing celebration of Black female eroticism is an act of resistance, the countdown of a ticking clock. Amidst the cheeky world of "Pynk" we are reminded of the real-world dystopia, that is, quotidian misogyny. The pulse of the snaps lasts until the very last line of the song, a steady, unyielding protest enacted from the body. Rather than passive acceptance of misogyny, these women use their bodies, the very thing that is pitted against them, to sonically and visually express critical optimism.

In the tradition of Janelle Monáe, "Pynk" is not a one-dimensional anthem about women's biology, but rather an exploration of the life of Jane, a queer woman of color. Janelle Monáe came out as pansexual the same year that *Dirty Computer* was released.<sup>54</sup> The story in *Dirty Computer* revolves around Jane's romantic relationship with a man and a woman, Ché and Zen respectively. Jane and Zen's relationship, however, is the relationship featured most prominently, and "Pynk" beautifully illustrates their romance in bubble pop fashion. *Dirty Computer* includes women, men, and non-binary folk, but "Pynk" is a monologue for the vagina.

"Pynk" equating a vagina with womanhood, however, comes with a set of problems. This brings us back to the costume choice, the vagina pants, or "pussy pants." This costume choice is in direct response to Trump's infamous "grab them by the pussy" comment and also to the political debate over reproductive rights. In an interview with MTV News, Monáe states that the pussy pants dance sequence featured at the beginning of the song includes women with and without the pants and that "Pynk" is a song that celebrates women in their varieties.<sup>55</sup> She further discloses that the women dancing without the pants signify transwomen. And so, while she may be referring to some kind of metaphoric vagina, the act of controlling women's reproduction only directly affects those with reproductive capabilities: some ciswomen, some transmen, and some who are gender non-conforming. So, although this could have a more pointed message regarding reproductive rights and

those with literal vaginas, Monáe's "vagina monologue" conflates gender identity, sexuality, and biology.

This conflation renders transmen's sexual engagements with other men and the possibility of reproduction invisible. This conflation simultaneously and simplistically equates the need for reproductive rights to that of ciswomen. It effectively erases the violence inflicted on transmen by "grab them by the pussy" rhetoric. Ultimately, this ultra-femme call-to-arms falls short of overcoming hegemonic forces that stigmatize transgender embodiment. In other words, Monáe specifically includes women with and without vaginas, but unintentionally excludes transmen and other non-binary people with reproductive capabilities. And despite her references to vaginas, she only includes ciswomen and transwomen in the music video. Thus, Monáe essentially ignores an entire group of people: transmen and their vaginas.

The pussy pants gesture of inclusivity is a signature of Janelle Monáe; unfortunately, this gesture, by conflating vaginas with femme identities, is only inclusive of some trans identities. In the days of Cindi Mayweather, the android messiah was a catch-all heroine representing all "those who are marginalized." Precisely because Cindi Mayweather is all-purpose, a white cis-heteronormative man, for example, may identify and claim her music as representing his experience (if indeed he experiences the violence of surveillance). And in that moment of identification a person who is presumably most privileged may learn to sympathize with a Black non-normative woman who expresses herself through song. Janelle Monáe's attempt at all-inclusivity, from Cindi to Jane, can appear to fall into cultural neoliberal logics, producing heroines that can be consumed by the masses, which Dan Hassler-Forest warns, may run "the risk of separating critique from any specific power formation or set of social relations."<sup>56</sup> Throughout most of *Dirty Computer*, Jane<sup>57</sup> portrays a non-universal politic. "Pynk's" widespread identification, an attempt at maintaining some of the universality of Cindi Mayweather, is a deviation from the rest of the emotion picture that emphasizes positionality and specificity.

## Janelle Monáe's Critical Optimism in Response to Nationalist Whiteface

"Today, I'm Janelle Monáe. Also known as Dirty Computer. Also known as a free ass motherfucka."

—Janelle Monáe in an interview<sup>57</sup>

"I'm not America's nightmare  
I'm the American Dream"

“Cross my heart and I hope to die  
With a big old piece of American pie”

–“Americans,” *Dirty Computer*

Monáe is intensely focused on how she is defined—by name, by kind, by spirit—as evidenced by the quote and lyrics above. The ArchAndroid, Electric Lady, Dirty Computer, these are only a few names that Monáe has given herself. In the final track of *Dirty Computer* Monáe defines herself again: American. As the chorus of the song states, this heroine is an American who wants a piece of the American dream (or “American pie”). Ten years prior to the release of *Dirty Computer*, at the 2008 democratic convention, Jay-Z voiced the belief of many hopeful others that “you can be anything you want to be in the world. Black people are no longer left out of the American dream.”<sup>58</sup> In “Americans,” Monáe sings of the dream that is now available to an American such as herself. In this song Monáe makes an interesting choice in her alter egoing. In an album that is all about Black womanhood, the final track takes on what I call “nationalist whiteface.” Unlike the music videos “Q.U.E.E.N.” and “Mine” discussed earlier, there is no optic or tinted whiteface in *Dirty Computer*. Instead, there is nationalist whiteface in the final number. I define “nationalist whiteface” as rhetoric that implicitly signifies right-leaning white nationalist Americans; post-2016 nationalist whiteface can also be referred to as “MAGA whiteface.”

Monáe’s nationalist whiteface is preceded with the roll of credits, as though the visual album has finished. Ominous waves of synth music feed the dystopian ending: Jane, the “dirty computer,” is cleansed and assimilated into the totalitarian system. The credits cut to the patient monitoring chart of Jane’s male romantic partner, Ché. The digital chart of his brain activity starts to glitch and in walks Jane’s female romantic partner, Zen. The automatic doors open, she walks into the room, face covered with a gas mask, hands behind her back. The camera turns to Jane<sup>57821</sup> standing over the prostrate Ché, who just moments before was laying on that very same table. Zen informs Ché, “I am here to bring you from the darkness into the light.” Zen tosses gas masks to Jane and Ché and an alternate ending to the story is initiated as a gospel choir offers hope: “Hold on, don’t fight your war alone.” We witness the downfall of the system that worked so hard to cleanse Jane<sup>57821</sup>. The non-diegetic chorus of dirty computers declare, “We will win this fight.” Then starts the enactment of nationalistic whiteface, a list of phrases that a liberal left American could (would) ascribe to MAGA culture:

I like my woman in the kitchen  
I teach my children superstition  
I keep my two guns on my blue nightstand  
A pretty young thang, she can wash my clothes  
But she'll never, ever wear my pants

As an audience informed by contemporary electoral politics in the United States listens to Jane57821 declare "I pledge allegiance to the flag/Learned the words from my mom and dad/Cross my heart and I hope to die/With a big old piece of American pie," a thick event is generated. Although sung by Janelle Monáe, the audience members assess the content and may assume the speech act emanates from an "all American," white body. As the song continues, it is not clear from which vantage point we are supposed to interpret the following lyric:

Don't try to take my country  
I will defend my land  
I'm not crazy, baby, naw  
I'm American

These lyrics bear a strong right-wing, if not alt-right, sensibility. Perhaps this verse could express how the US has progressed for the better, that indeed, the nation has moved away from this protectionist belief system.

More likely, Monáe is performing nationalist whiteface, impersonating the right-wing conservative American citizen spouting the belief that America, the country that belongs to them (and the accompanying "American Dream" offered) is being taken away (as in Michael Kimmel's critique of white angry men). But, as the song continues, we are brought into someone else's perspective, and they also lay claim to the same America: "Seventy-nine cents to your dollar/All that bullshit from white-collars." These lines from the second verse can be taken up as a response or rebuttal to the first verse and elicit the question, "who is speaking in verse one?" Verse two obviously comes from the perspective of a racialized woman with the lyrics, "Seventy-nine cents to your dollar/ . . . You see my color before my vision/Sometimes I wonder if you were blind/Would it help you make a better decision?" This obvious point of view could make one assume that verse one is coming from the perspective of a white American man. Black women, however, have not just been targets of white male entitlement, but they have also suffered misogyny at the hands of their own Black community. In just these first two verses, each informing the other, "Americans" presents the intersecting hurdles of Black womanhood, as both women and racialized other.



# Conclusion

Monáe's Obama-era alter ego manifested as the android, Cindi Mayweather, with unclear origin and convoluted narrative timeline. Cindi Mayweather was rendered a forced metaphor of universality. With the release of the visual album *Dirty Computer* in 2018, Monáe revamped her alter ego into a clearly defined dystopian heroine with a narrative that depended on specificity. Furthermore, Jane57821 makes explicit references to the mounting white (male) nostalgia and anti-Black populisms of MAGA culture in the era of Trump. I understand the evolution of Janelle Monáe's alter egoing as a reaction to these affective political strategies mobilized in electoral politics, and that the transformation of her alter egos are indicative of shared, social feelings that evolve according to contemporary political events.

From Cindi Mayweather wearing a tux to Jane57821 dancing in a pair of vagina pants, Monáe's alter egoing outlines the pros and cons of identification that depend on universality and specificity. The subtle and even dissonant nature of Cindi Mayweather alter egoing exposes the harm of the post-racial fallacy promoted by American politics circa Obama's election and at the same time enables a nuanced performance of gender, race, and sexuality. Jane57821's queer Black female specificity, that somehow also attempts to be a universal icon, inadvertently erases some kinds of transgender identities. Even with the various pitfalls of Cindi and Jane alter egoing, Monáe begins to craft an affective strategy for queer subjects in a heteroracist America. This strategy, critical optimism, is a reflexive process wherein the marginalized subject is aware of the material realities which negate their personhood. Critical optimism modifies Snediker's queer optimism with a bell hooksian' oppositional stance.<sup>59</sup> Like hooks' political rebellion found in the "looking back" or returned gaze of the racialized subject, critical optimism allows Monáe to craft a unique narrative that defies the futures and outcomes that have been designated to queer Black women in a racist, heteropatriarchal society.

## Notes

1. "Talking with Janelle Monáe on Sci-Fi, Androids and Slack (full interview)," CNET Highlights, Jan 15, 2020, YouTube video, 8:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLHAa-1D2WU> < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLHAa-1D2WU>> . ↩
2. "Talking with Janelle Monáe." ↩
3. Alex Benson, "The Alien Metaphor: Queer Identity In Modern Music," Medium, April 29, 2019, <https://medium.com/loopandreplay/the-alien-metaphor-f1045ec1ba2a> < <https://medium.com/loopandreplay/the-alien-metaphor-f1045ec1ba2a>> . ↩
4. Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer*, Bad Boy Records, 2018. ↩
5. Janelle Monáe, Big Boi, Saul Williams, Wondaland ArchOrchestra of Montreal, and Deep Cotton, *The ArchAndroid: Suite II and III*, Bad Boy Records/Wondaland, 2010; Janelle Monáe, Prince,

- Erykah Badu, Solange, Miguel, and Esperanza Spalding, *The Electric Lady*, Bad Boy Records/Wondaland, 2013; Janelle Monáe, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite I*. Bad Boy Records, 2007. ↵
6. For more on alter egoing, see Larissa Irizarry, "Performing Political Affect: Alter Egos and Black Feminism in Popular Music," PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2022. ↵
  7. Janelle Monáe, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite I*; Janelle Monáe, et al., *The ArchAndroid: Suite II and III*; Janelle Monáe, et al., *The Electric Lady*. ↵
  8. When it comes to identity, specifically identity-oriented analysis, the naming of characters and persons is of utmost importance. What one calls another, or what one calls themselves has the potential to limit or expand the essence of who they are. There may be some confusion when analyzing certain characters in Monáe's works, like "Django Jane," as she can be understood to be both a personality of Jane57821 and a new alter ego altogether. I will not attempt to mitigate this instability of identity, but rather to embrace the resonances and dissonances of multivalent identifications through alter egoing. ↵
  9. Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 121, [https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2\\_79](https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79) < [https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2\\_79-117](https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-117) >. ↵
  10. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006). ↵
  11. I use the phrase "white (male) nostalgia," to indicate the historic whiteness of the sentiment "Make America Great Again," and its implicit maleness, as a nostalgic longing for pre-Obama America. ↵
  12. "Janelle Monáe Says 'Q.U.E.E.N.' is for the 'Ostracized & Marginalized,'" Fuse TV, accessed October 27, 2020, <https://www.fuse.tv/videos/2013/09/janelle-monae-queen-interview> < <https://www.fuse.tv/videos/2013/09/janelle-monae-queen-interview> >. ↵
  13. "Janelle Monáe Says 'Q.U.E.E.N.'" ↵
  14. "Janelle Monáe Says 'Q.U.E.E.N.'" ↵
  15. Gillian Andrews, "Janelle < <http://io9.com/5592174/janelle-monae-turns-rhythm-and-blues-into-science-fiction> > Monáe Turns Rhythm and Blues into Science Fiction," < <http://io9.com/5592174/janelle-monae-turns-rhythm-and-blues-into-science-fiction> > July 21, 2010, *io9.com*, <https://gizmodo.com/janelle-monae-turns-rhythm-and-blues-into-science-fiction-5592174> < <https://gizmodo.com/janelle-monae-turns-rhythm-and-blues-into-science-fiction-5592174> >. ↵
  16. Ellis Cashmore, "Buying Beyoncé." *Celebrity Studies* 1.2 (2010): 143, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2010.482262> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2010.482262> >. ↵
  17. Faedra Chatard Carpenter, *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance*. *Coloring Whiteness* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 26. ↵
  18. Carpenter, *Coloring Whiteness*, 2. ↵
  19. Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Duke University Press, 2019), 9. ↵
  20. Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 5. ↵
  21. R. Bengal, "'You Don't Own Or Control Me': Janelle Monáe on Her Music, Politics and Undefinable Sexuality," *Guardian*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/22/you-dont-own-or-control-me-janelle-monae-on-her-music-politics-and-undefinable-sexuality> < <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/22/you-dont-own-or-control-me-janelle-monae-on-her-music-politics-and-undefinable-sexuality> >. ↵

22. For more on the respectable/ratchet dichotomy amongst Black women of popular culture, see Ashley Payne, "The Cardi B–Beyoncé Complex: Ratchet Respectability and Black Adolescent Girlhood," *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 7, no. 1 (July 1, 2020): 26–116, <https://doi.org/10.34718/pxew-7785> < <https://doi.org/10.34718/pxew-7785> >; Carmel Ohman, "Undisciplining the Black Pussy: Pleasure, Black Feminism, and Sexuality in Issa Rae's *Insecure*," *The Black Scholar* 50, no. 2 (2020): 5–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2020.1727196> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2020.1727196> >. ↵
23. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). ↵
24. Homonormativity is the replication and performance of heteronormative ideals, such as monogamy and cisgenderism), among homosexual people. See Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson, *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); David M. Halperin, *How To Be Gay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 441. ↵
25. Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris, "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 3 (2013): 724–725, <https://doi.org/10.1086/668843> < <https://doi.org/10.1086/668843> >. ↵
26. Ohman, "Undisciplining," 10. ↵
27. Rebecca Bengal, "'You Don't Own or Control Me': Janelle Monáe on Her Music, Politics and Undefined Sexuality," *Guardian*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/22/you-dont-own-or-control-me-janelle-monae-on-her-music-politics-and-undefined-sexuality> < <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/22/you-dont-own-or-control-me-janelle-monae-on-her-music-politics-and-undefined-sexuality> >. ↵
28. Allison Janae Hamilton, "Black Marvelous: An Examination of the Carnavalesque in African American Visual Culture" (PhD diss., New York University, 2015), 48–49, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1710778460> < <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1710778460> >. ↵
29. Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. 40. ↵
30. Anne Stavney, "Cross-Dressing Harlem, Re-Dressing Race" *Women's Studies* 28 (1999): 139, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1999.9979249> < <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1999.9979249> >. ↵
31. Hamilton, "Black Marvelous," 58–59. ↵
32. Terry Gross, "Janelle Monáe Wants To Represent The Underdog—In Music And Onscreen," *Fresh Air*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/18/856841290/janelle-mon-e-wants-to-represent-the-underdog-in-music-and-onscreen> < <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/18/856841290/janelle-mon-e-wants-to-represent-the-underdog-in-music-and-onscreen> >. ↵
33. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), 149–181. ↵
34. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto." ↵
35. Alex Benson, "The Alien Metaphor: Queer Identity in Modern Music," *Medium*, April 29, 2019, <https://medium.com/loopandreplay/the-alien-metaphor-f1045ec1ba2a> < <https://medium.com/loopandreplay/the-alien-metaphor-f1045ec1ba2a> >. ↵
36. "Janelle Monáe Says 'Q.U.E.E.N.'." ↵
37. "Janelle Monáe Says 'Q.U.E.E.N.'." ↵
38. Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). ↵

39. J. Winters, "Afropessimism's Contributions to Black Studies," *AAIHS*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.aaihs.org/afropessimisms-contributions-to-black-studies> < <https://www.aaihs.org/afropessimisms-contributions-to-black-studies/> > . ↩
40. Jennifer Nash, "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-politics, and Post-intersectionality," *Meridians* 11, no. 2 (2011): 3, <https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.11.2.1> < <https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.11.2.1> > . ↩
41. Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 121. ↩
42. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Barack Obama's Original Sin: America's Post-Racial Illusion," *Guardian*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/13/barack-obama-legacy-racism-criminal-justice-system> < <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/13/barack-obama-legacy-racism-criminal-justice-system> > . ↩
43. Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039> < <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039> > . ↩
44. Greg Thomas, "Afro-Blue Notes: The Death of Afro-pessimism (2.0)?" *Theory & Event* 21, no. 1 (2018): 282–317, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/685979> < <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/685979> > . ↩
45. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 118. For more on affect and the socio-political, see Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies." 121. She gives the definition that affect is "social feelings that are shaped by specific political events and socio-political environments." ↩
46. Céline Leboeuf, "'The Audacity of Hope': Reclaiming Obama's Optimism in the Trump Era." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 33, no. 2 (2019): 256–67, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.33.2.0256> < <https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.33.2.0256> > ; Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham N.C: Duke University Press, 2011); Snediker, Michael D. *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). ↩
47. The referentiality of Monáe's "Django Jane" is two-deep in that *Django Unchained* refers to the 1966 film *Django* in which a main character (not the title character) is a mixed-race prostitute. ↩
48. Lyrics from "Django Jane." ↩
49. This double bind has been theorized by Frances Beal's concept of "double jeopardy" that articulates how race and gender affect the lives of black women by compounding oppression. Frances Beal, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," *Meridians* 8, no. 2 (2008): 166–176, <https://doi.org/10.2979/MER.2008.8.2.166> < <https://doi.org/10.2979/MER.2008.8.2.166> > . Deborah King added class to the double jeopardy formulation, renaming it "multiple jeopardy." Deborah K. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 1 (1988): 42–72, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494491> < <https://doi.org/10.1086/494491> > . Patricia Hill Collins gives a cinematic/visual dimension to this double bindedness with her concept of controlling images that distinguish damaging stereotypes of Black women (e.g., the mammie, the matriarch) that oppress and constrain the lives of real Black women. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, Routledge, 2002). ↩
50. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 83. ↩
51. Rebecca Bengal, "'You Don't Own Or Control Me': Janelle Monáe on Her Music, Politics and Undefined Sexuality," *Guardian*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/22/you-dont-own-or-control-me-janelle-monae-on-her-music-politics-and-undefinable-sexuality> < <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/22/you-dont-own-or-control-me-janelle-monae-on-her-music-politics-and-undefinable-sexuality> > . ↩
52. Janell Hobson, "Remnants of Venus: Signifying Black Beauty and Sexuality," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 46 (2018): <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsqr.2018.0015> <

<https://doi.org/10.1353/ws.2018.0015>> ; Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; and Ohman, "Undisciplining," 7. ↩

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# Author Information



## Larissa Irizarry

Larissa recently earned a PhD in Musicology from the University of Pittsburgh and will be joining the music and Africana studies faculty at Gettysburg College in Fall 2022. She has been published in *Women and Music*, *Notes*, and *Ethnomusicology Review*. Aside from her work on queer vocality in the musical film, her work engages with twenty-first century avant-garde opera and popular music. She explores such themes as sonic grief, operatic discourse on gender-based violence in the era of #MeToo, and Black feminist theory in visual albums.

[View all of Larissa Irizarry's articles.](#)

## Article details

Larissa Irizarry, "Alter Egoing: The Shifting Affects of Janelle Monáe," *Lateral* 11.1 (2022).

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## Review of *The Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment* by Jillian Hernandez (Duke University Press)

by Iván Ramos | Book Reviews, Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

**ABSTRACT** *The Aesthetics of Excess* by Jillian Hernandez is a dazzling and provocative book that deploys the aesthetic as a category to grasp with great care the lives and representations of Black and Latina women whose performance of gender exceeds the white middle class norms of feminine comportment.

**KEYWORDS** performance, aesthetics, popular, Latina, Black women, excess

*The Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment*. By Jillian Hernandez. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020, 303 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1110-1. US List: \$27.95

A few years ago, while I was giving a guest lecture on the artist Xandra Ibarra, a young Latina student objected to the artist's performance of racialized femininity. To her, Ibarra—an artist trained in the Bay Area burlesque scene and who deploys excess femininity to great effect across her pieces—had fallen trap to the social pressures that signify Latina womanhood. How could Ibarra's performances be effective if they reproduced the patriarchal gaze that defines femininity? Jillian Hernandez's dazzling *The Aesthetics of Excess* provides a rigorous response to such accusations, often lobbed at Latina and Black women, and who are the protagonists of this book. Hernandez writes "of how notions of high and low culture are complicated when young women of color engage in cultural production, as well as how they challenge the disciplining of their bodies and sexualities through artistic authorship" (8). *Aesthetics of Excess* develops this claim throughout the book in order to emphasize the ways in which social codes surveil how young Black and Latina girls and young women, especially those coming from working class backgrounds, reaffirm themselves through a variety of means. Hernandez thus provides us with a thorough—and often moving—study of "how the discourse of aesthetic excess, and its attendant debates, significantly structure the boundaries around legitimate and deviant forms of gendered Blackness and Latinidad" (3).

Hernandez's particular investment in "sexual-aesthetic excess as a concept for theorizing modes of dress and comportment that are often considered 'too-much': too sexy, too ethnic, too young, too cheap, too loud" (12) blurs the distinctions between the intellectual and the personal. Her autoethnographic account details the many moments in which she has had to navigate these lines, and the disciplining toll brought upon social pressures to perform middle-class and "acceptable" modes of self-fashioning. The accounts that Hernandez provides of her own experiences, however, never fall into solipsistic reflection. Instead, they ground the book by showing readers that we are in the hands of someone who has spent time thinking and living through these questions. It is thus unsurprising that the resulting book feels like an offering grounded not only in the author's background, but also in the many Black and Latina girls and young women she invites into her narrative in order to provide us with a convincing, and urgent, argument.

*The Aesthetics of Excess* expertly deploys a wide methodological and disciplinary toolbox. The book is grounded by Hernandez's experience as the founder of Women on the Rise! (WOTR), a community project which, in collaboration with the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, offered young incarcerated women access to "an intergenerational feminist art praxis" (1). WOTR was Hernandez's response to an unjust and often dehumanizing system that relegated these young women to often violent forms of engagement within the prison walls. Hernandez explains in detail the work and aims of WOTR with deep care. Indeed, Hernandez returns to the voices of these young women throughout the book. Her ethnographic account of this experience offers a chorus of voices that the author shares as an ethical commitment to collaboration. Even if Hernandez's name occupies the front cover as the book's author, she makes clear to the reader that this work is the result of the kinds of thinking and doing that she experienced with these girls and young women. They are her interlocutors, and Hernandez's understanding and respect of their time together is apparent throughout the book.

In addition to this ethnographic narrative, Hernandez proves to be a gifted reader of cultural and aesthetic objects alongside specific political contexts. She is able to deftly examine the representational politics of a magazine cover or a major pop artist like Nicky Minaj with the same level of attention that she brings to her young collaborators. This is also in part because of her ability to expertly engage with Black and Latinx feminist thought across each of the chapters in a way that both pays respect to these traditions while always offering an original and exciting argument that proves how the subjects she examines "agitate normative discourses of respectability and social mobility" (18).

Each chapter manages to develop a multifaceted yet rigorous argument, as illustrated by the second chapter, devoted to the Chonga girls of Miami and beyond. According to Hernandez, Chonga girls are part of a long genealogy of Latina excess that includes cholas



and pachucas, Chicana feminist figures who themselves exceed the traditional demands of feminine comportment. Chonga girls received popular attention in 2007, when the YouTube video "Chongalicious," made by two local Miami teenage girls, went viral. Hernandez analyzes the video to stage a discussion of the ways in which Chonga girls exceed the stereotypes ascribed to these girls. She explores how "when considering the race politics that shape discourses of Latinx mainstreaming through valuations of whiteness, the Chonga's association with Blackness signals a deviance that is to be disavowed in Latinx communities." Thus, rather than simply recuperate the Chonga girl for the sake of her argument, Hernandez lingers in the difficult and necessary politics that make these young women complicated figures both derided and celebrated. Ultimately, one of the book's greatest strengths lies in Hernandez's willingness to offer readers something beyond a celebratory narrative of the aesthetics of excess, allowing the complex racial, social, and economic realities of her case studies to be fully present, which in turn is a reflection of the love, kinship, and respect that she has for her objects (and subjects).

This brings me to another major element that makes this book so exciting: when I received the book, I was stunned by how absolutely *beautiful* it is. As Hernandez mentions in her acknowledgements, she secured enough financial support to produce a truly outstanding volume filled with images printed in color. Rather than an indulgence, the physical beauty of the book seems necessary in order to pay proper tribute to the acts of embodiment we encounter in these pages. Or perhaps more fittingly: to reprint these images in full color is itself a loving indulgence that recreates Hernandez's exploration of the glories of aesthetic excess. In many ways, the author's writing style matches this commitment. I was continuously impressed by the fact that Hernandez manages the difficult feat of crafting an approachable text that could be read by the young women she speaks with while remaining faithful to the demands of a scholarly monograph. *The Aesthetics of Excess* is conversational yet theoretically complex, the kind of book that can feel equally at home in an undergraduate course or a graduate seminar without losing any of its nuances. Ultimately, such accessibility is a testament to the way in which Hernandez and *The Aesthetics of Excess* model a form of ethical commitment to bringing the messy and beautiful complexities of gender, race, sexuality, and class into the academy. This is a thrilling work that never forgets that loving its subjects is essential to scholarly precision.

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# Author Information

## Iván Ramos

Iván A. Ramos is assistant professor in the Department of Theater Arts and Performance Studies at Brown University. His broader research investigates the links and slippages between transnational Latino/a/x American aesthetics in relationship to the everydayness of contemporary and historical violence. In particular, he is interested in how the aesthetic may provide a way to engage with an ethics of difference. His work brings together performance studies, queer and feminist theory, Latina/o/x American Studies, and media and film studies. His first book, *Sonic Negations: Unbelonging Subjects, Inauthentic Objects, and Sound between Mexico and the United States* (forthcoming from NYU Press), examines how "dissonant sound" brought together artists and alternative subcultures on both sides of the border in the wake of NAFTA to articulate a politics of negation against larger cultural and economic changes.

[View all of Iván Ramos's articles.](#)

## Article details

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## Review of *The Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Freedom* by Rinaldo Walcott (Duke University Press)

by Shauna Rigaud | Book Reviews, Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

**ABSTRACT** In *The Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Freedom*, Rinaldo Walcott argues, through the use of short essays, that the Black experience can be understood through the lens of the constant struggle for emancipation. For Walcott, true freedom for Black people was never attained with emancipation and in fact, emancipation is still an ongoing process. Each chapter interrogates an aspect of Black life and death that according to Walcott create the space for Black freedom to exist.

**KEYWORDS** citizenship, colonialism, race, Blackness, freedom, modernity

*The Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Freedom*. By Rinaldo Walcott. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021. 129 pp. (paperback) ISBN 9781478014058. US List: \$23.95

In *The Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Freedom*, Rinaldo Walcott engages with ideas of the racialized conception of human through his analysis of Black life and freedom. It is emancipation that Walcott wants to problematize, asserting that there is a clear distinction between the condition of emancipation and freedom. While historically we have seen the two as interchangeable, Walcott insists that for Black people, freedom has not yet been attained and that we are currently living in the state of the long emancipation (1), where policies of emancipation continuously place Black people in a state of subordination (4). Emancipation is part of a legal justification of life and humanity. It concerns a type of continued attachment to laws and policies that render Blackness outside of humanity. It is here that Walcott sees the work of his book, to examine the ways that the concept of emancipation has actually denied true Black freedom and to think broadly about what possibilities of Black freedom are created under this kind of peculiar existence of the Black subject.

Set up as short vignettes, each chapter explores Walcott's theories of Black life, death, and freedom. Walcott's focus on unfettering emancipation and freedom for the Black subject offers a nuanced understanding of the state of Black life and possibilities for freedom.

Throughout the text, Walcott uses the term "Black life form" as a move to reiterate the space outside of white European/American concepts of human that Black life existed and continues to exist. Black subjects have been defined in relationship to European Enlightenment ideas of humanity and thus emancipation and freedom cannot be seen the same. Walcott spends chapters 1 through 4 unpacking his theory of freedom through the understanding of Black death. Walcott sees the Americas as the zone for Black death, while it simultaneously produces Black life. It is under the constant threat of death that Black life forms are able to understand their lives and create vibrant cultures that reflect life. This is perhaps the kind of opportunity for freedom that Walcott sees. He makes the claim that, for Black life forms, potential freedom does not take the shape of a modernist linear narrative (3). Rather, it finds itself in the crevasses and cracks of what we think of as freedom. This is the long emancipation, this temporal space where there remains the juridical and legislative state of Black nonbeing, where freedom must squeeze through.

Walcott's theoretical framework also guides the organization of the book. Just like the way that Walcott sees freedom in the long emancipation, the chapters are not linear. They bounce around and feed off of one another without explicitly building on each other. Connections between each chapter are thread together within this larger discussion of freedom and Black life, but each chapter feels as though they can stand alone. Chapters 4, "Black Death," "Plantation Zones," and "Diaspora Studies," are examples of how Walcott does this. His chapter on "Black Death" speaks to how transatlantic slavery gives birth to our modern ideas of Blackness and a denial of humanity. Then he moves to "Plantation Zones" to further reiterate the Americas as a place of death and also the birth of Blackness. He then jumps to a conversation about diaspora studies and the importance of its ability to engage with the idea of transatlantic slavery and indigenous colonialization as intertwined and part of forging concepts of non-human Blackness. Since each chapter acts like stand-alone prose, Walcott spends significant time reiterating and clarifying his argument throughout the book. Thus, his text very much feels like a meditation of the various ways that Walcott sees freedom in the context of Black life and historicizing this long emancipation.

However, Walcott doesn't want to leave the reader without future possibility. Walcott firmly asserts that Black people have survived, created life and produced glimpses of freedom despite being rendered politically and economically outside of the definition of human. In his chapter, "Newness," Walcott reflects on the Funk musical genre as a space where Black freedom exists. Its musical notes, dances, lyrics, and artists buck against modern notions of respectability. In these creative performances, a new Black life is made human. That is how Walcott understands where the long emancipation leads us—constructing new forms of freedom, carving out spaces that refashion ideas of humanity, and reconstructing definitions of freedom outside of modernity and European Enlightenment. For Walcott,

freedom becomes the response that Black people have to the world, not one that was or can be granted with emancipation.

*The Long Emancipation* is part of a larger discourse on the construction of Blackness and issues of citizenship that come with that. He invokes conversations with Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, and C.L.R. James and highlights contemporary discussions with writers like Scott Poulson-Bryant, Christina Sharpe, and Richard Iton. Walcott reminds us that there are limitations to understanding Black freedom and humanity under our current systems and that we must go beyond them. His vision is best seen when he says, "the Black life-form in its most radical livability seeks to reject and rethink the human as a category through which pure radical possibilities for life-making might be available for all of us" (72).

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## Author Information



### Shauna Rigaud

Shauna Rigaud is a PhD Candidate in Cultural Studies at George Mason University. Her research focuses on Caribbean culture and economy, performance and performativity, Black feminism, and Caribbean feminism. She holds a BA in African American Studies from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and a Master's in both Gender/Cultural Studies and Communication Management from Simmons University.

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## Article details

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## Review of *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies* by Ma Vang (Duke University Press)

by Aline Lo | Book Reviews, Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

**ABSTRACT** In *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies*, Ma Vang deftly answers the question of how one can “recount a history that has systematically been kept secret” by centering Hmong refugees as sources of knowledge and critique (7). Her book scrutinizes the refugee archive to draw out stories that have been secreted away in other places: in a missing baggage claim, in the neutralization of Laos, in redacted documents, in the figure of the uncivilized Hmong soldier, in the naming of a war as “secret,” in the silenced bodies of Hmong women. Her central concept of “history on the run” refers to a form of fugitive knowledge that “does not remain still and cannot easily be found” (8). Vang’s book makes explicit the forms of knowledge that travel with and within refugee bodies, rather than the “official” history of the archive.

**KEYWORDS** history, archive, refugees, Hmong studies, epistemologies, secrecy, fugitivity, soldier

*History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies*. By Ma Vang. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021, 272 pp. (paperback) ISBN 9781478011316. US List: \$26.95.

In *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies*, Ma Vang deftly answers the question of how one can “recount a history that has systematically been kept secret” by centering Hmong refugees as sources of knowledge and critique (7). Drawing attention to the irony of the “Secret War,” a clandestine war fought in Laos during the Vietnam War, Vang outlines many forms of erasure while at the same time calling to task those who would try to normalize or recuperate loss, trauma, and displacement; those who would try to minimize and white out Hmong refugee knowledge; and those who would try to divorce Hmong refugee epistemologies from place, both figurative and literal. Her book scrutinizes the archive to draw out stories that have been secreted away in other places: in a missing baggage claim, in the neutralization of Laos, in redacted documents, in

the figure of the uncivilized Hmong soldier, in the naming of a war as “secret,” in the silenced bodies of Hmong women. Through Vang’s incisive and careful analysis, these acts and objects of erasure become powerful critiques of the United States’ militarism and the recuperative, revisionary narrative of refugee “rescue.” Her central concept of “history on the run” refers to a form of fugitive knowledge that “does not remain still and cannot easily be found” (8). Unlike histories that are found within official documents that are themselves fixed within the archive, “histories on the run” are felt or made present in the traces that trail behind or alongside those who have been displaced. Thus, Vang’s book makes explicit the forms of knowledge that travel with and within refugee bodies, rather than within the “official” history of the archive. In centering Hmong refugees, Vang continues the work of critical refugee studies and forges new paths for critical Hmong studies.

The first chapter begins to unearth the epistemological harm of secreted knowledge through a meticulous analysis of the formulation of Hmong soldiering and of a neutralized Laos. For the former, Vang argues how the secret recruitment, training, and deployment of Hmong men—soldiering—was a “civilizing tool” meant to both “save” Hmong peoples *and* use them as expendable proxies for US servicemen (38). This dualistically exploitative and recuperative use of Hmong soldiers is in line with the contradictory neutralization of Laos. In what Vang calls a state of “suspended decolonization,” Laos was at once declared a neutral state even as it was used as a site to repel Communist forces. Thus, Laos, like Hmong soldiers, was falsely presented as a site ready to be civilized so that it could be more readily exploited. Both these concepts point to Vang’s larger critique of the “secret war” as an “interimperial event” that was connected to overlapping histories of Southeast Asian colonization (28).

The second chapter continues the discussion of harm by focusing more directly on archival materials and reading through the lens of “missing things” (62). Examining archived maps, memos, letters, forms, etc., Vang does not set out to correct the record, but to think more concretely about how these redactions and erasures construct and limit knowledge production. In a form from resettlement case files that list “Occupation and Skills,” Yang reads beyond the physical words to ruminate on the longer histories that cannot be captured in the term “student,” reminding us of the incomplete and destructive nature of the archive and challenging us to read through absences and erasures.

In the third chapter, Vang focuses on the Hmong Veterans’ Naturalization Act of 1997 in order to draw out the contradictions of secretive knowledge and the problematic “reward” of citizenship and public recognition. Largely using transcripts from the subcommittee hearings about the bill, which was meant to ease the naturalization process for Hmong soldiers and widows, Vang points to the continued effort to present Hmong refugees as uncivilized victims and the US as modernizing savior. More broadly, Vang reads this event



as “but one domain in the politics of recognition,” as an incomplete and flawed gesture to address the violent secrecy of this war (112).

The fourth chapter, further emphasizing the insufficiency of citizenship as a form of recognition and inclusion, discusses what Vang calls the “terrorist ally” or the dramatic transformation of the refugee ally into a terrorist threat. By analyzing mostly Hmong media coverage of General Vang Pao’s alleged crimes against the state, Vang argues that this event simultaneously reveals the dangers of state secreted knowledge *and* the power of Hmong “assertion of history and secrets” (124).

Vang ends with a fifth chapter on Hmong American media representation, turning to Kao Kalia Yang’s *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* and the film *Gran Torino*. Vang reads the grandmother characters in the respective works as figures who “drag history” to “underscore the silences and unspeakability of militarized violence” in order to subsequently make those silences speak (147). For example, Vang argues that the bags that the grandmother in Yang’s memoir moves from house to house show how “she managed to stay mobile in order to pass on histories and knowledge in spite of the confines of her status as a Hmong-speaking refugee woman” (152). These bags are not direct remnants of things carried from Laos for many of these things are gone. Instead, in Vang’s analysis, the bags mark the grandmother’s mobility, a mobility that makes it possible for her to share the knowledge that the author Yang will then go on to write down.

The idea of history on run—of grappling with what has been visibly erased—is a particularly helpful framework for a field like Hmong American Studies that has often been defined through dualistic terms that seem to cancel each other out, such as the good soldier but the bad refugee, or the invisible Asian American but the hypervisible non-model minority. And, within the field of Asian studies, scholars, many of whom are white, have, for so many years, made Hmong people primitive objects to be classified and explained away. While both fields have changed with Hmong scholars like Chia Youyee Vang and Mai Na Lee, Vang’s book is the first to fully claim critical Hmong studies. It truly marks a turn in Hmong studies, one that demands complexity and rigor, and asks its readers to think critically about Hmong knowledge and about how academia sustains white supremacy. In naming these open secrets, Vang demonstrates that knowledge—if one is careful to drag histories on the run—*can* indeed be powerful.

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# Author Information

## Aline Lo

Aline Lo is a scholar of American refugee literature and Hmong American Studies. She currently holds the position of Assistant Professor of Asian American literature at Colorado College. She has published on Hmong, Southeast Asian American, and refugee film and literature. Her other interests include migration, gender, and life writing. Her current book project posits the "problematic" elements of Southeast Asian American literature as generative, emphasizing the untidy, uncomfortable process of reading texts that trouble cultural and literary expectations.

[View all of Aline Lo's articles.](#)

## Article details

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## Review of *Ocean Passages: Navigating Pacific Islander and Asian American Literatures* by Erin Suzuki (Temple University Press)

by Sandra So Hee Chi Kim | Book Reviews, Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

**ABSTRACT** Erin Suzuki's *Ocean Passages* is a sustained analysis of how various narratives of "ocean passages" disrupt and revise hegemonic constructions of the Pacific. Through analyses of contemporary Indigenous Pacific and Asian American literatures, Suzuki demonstrates what new paradigms can emerge by bringing Asian and Pacific Islander passages across the same sea into critical relationality.

**KEYWORDS** Indigenous peoples, Asian American, decolonial, literature, transpacific

*Ocean Passages: Navigating Pacific Islander and Asian American Literatures*. By Erin Suzuki. Temple University Press, 2021, 268 pp. (paperback). ISBN 143992094X. US List: \$39.95.

Transpacific studies is facing a moment of reckoning. Roughly a decade ago, the field established itself through pathbreaking volumes like *The Trans-Pacific Imagination: Rethinking Boundary, Culture and Society*, edited by Naoki Sakai and Hyon Joo Yoo, and *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*, edited by Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Hoskins.<sup>1</sup> These works introduced a fresh approach to scholarship that explored the connections and potential cross-pollinations among Asian studies, Asian American studies, cultural studies, and American studies. Transpacific methods introduced a way to move beyond simply identifying Orientalist binarisms of "East" versus "West" toward actually disrupting longstanding disciplinary boundaries that European colonialism and Cold War imperialism produced. Moreover, transpacific studies has created a much-needed paradigm shift that provincializes the United States and the "West" at the same time that it refuses to see the US as disconnected from Asia. The transpacific framework has opened up new ways for scholars to think about the dynamics of US empire in Asia as well the movement of people, cultures, ideas, and capital from Asia into the US.

At the same time that transpacific studies produced such generative scholarship, scholars in Asian American and Pacific Islander studies have articulated an important critique of the field: that its transnational approach takes for granted settler colonial paradigms of the nation-state.<sup>2</sup> The framework of the transpacific in practice has perpetuated colonial dynamics of indigenous erasure even as it has sought to critique modern empire. Recently Aimee Bahng and Erin Suzuki have written about the importance of cultivating an “ocean-centered transpacific studies” in order to move us toward what Lisa Yoneyama calls a “decolonial genealogy of the transpacific.”<sup>3</sup> Suzuki models what an ocean-centered turn in transpacific Asian American studies could look like in a field like literary studies in her new book, *Ocean Passages: Navigating Pacific Islander and Asian American Literatures*.

*Ocean Passages* examines how movement within, through, and across the Pacific Ocean mediates the subjectivities of Asian American and Indigenous Pacific communities in the wake of colonial conflicts that have shaped the region. Through a sustained analysis of how various narratives of “ocean passages” disrupt and revise hegemonic constructions of the Pacific, Suzuki demonstrates what new orientations, concepts, and openings can emerge by bringing Asian and Pacific Islander passages across the same sea into a critical analytic of relation. Her comparative methodology focuses on what Epeli Hau’ofa calls “stories of ocean passage” as they intersect and overlap in contemporary Indigenous Pacific and Asian American literatures. The figure of passage opens up different critical possibilities that can emerge from the prefix “trans-” in transpacific studies; Suzuki explores not only the flows of peoples, objects, or ideas between continents, but also how these flows create their own seascape epistemologies and subjectivities. As such, Suzuki argues that a transpacific studies that relies only on “abstractive or extractive visions of the Pacific” reproduces the very neoliberal practices it critiques and urges us to consider it instead as a relational, polycentric space of diverse communities and cultures. Suzuki’s decolonial transpacific approach performs three important moves: 1) it attends to Indigenous Pacific epistemologies and ontologies, 2) it accounts for the entangled histories of diverse communities and cultures, and 3) it examines their constantly shifting and relative positionalities in and across the sea.

Each chapter in the book addresses an interrelated form of oceanic passage that brings transpacific Asian American and Indigenous Pacific literary and cultural texts into dialogic relation: militarized passages, refugee passages, commercial passages, embodied passages, and lastly, virtual passages. In “Militarized Passages: Securing the Sea,” Suzuki deftly explores militarized oceanic passages and the racialized, neocolonial nature of US occupation and militarization of the Pacific Ocean from the time of the Cold War through readings of James George’s *Ocean Roads* alongside James Michener’s *Tales of the South Pacific*. Her analysis brings into focus how the experiences of crossing the ocean undermine and resist militarized claims of nation-states that seek to territorialize and

securitize the space of the ocean under the aegis of “liberty.” In doing so, Suzuki draws out the range of new connections and networks formed among communities affected by militarized violence, and alternative archives of the transpacific.

Her second chapter, “Refugee Passages: In the Wake of War,” focuses on another aspect of militarized ocean space through the figure of the refugee by reading the novel *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* by Vietnamese American writer Lê Thị Diễm Thúy together with the poetry of Marshallese writer Kathy Jentil-Kijiner. What this juxtaposition of refugee experience in and across the Pacific yields is remarkable insight into the neocolonial entanglements and interconnections between environmental trauma and war trauma, between the experiences of Pacific Island dispossession and Asian American displacement.

Again creating surprising juxtapositions, “Commercial Passages: On Cycles and Circulations,” looks at the work of Chinese American authors Ken Liu and Maxine Hong Kingston alongside the work of Tongan writers Epeli Hau’ofa and Konai Helu Thaman. She looks to how these authors depict the enormous labor required for commercial passages of people, communications, and commodities through ocean space that has been deterritorialized in service of the flows of capital and its neocolonial dynamics. Against the abstractions of capital, Suzuki shows how these authors emphasize the materiality of ocean space and the bridge it serves for diverse alternative cultures of circulation.

“Embodied Passages: “Local” Motions and the Settler Colonial Body Politic” examines Hawai’i as a specific site of where Indigenous Pacific and immigrant ocean passages intersect, specifically through the tensions and contradictions of the figuration of the multicultural “local” body which simultaneously invokes and erases Kanaka Maoli (native Hawaiian) indigeneity. By focusing on how the work of Hawai’i-born Japanese American author Lois-Ann Yamanaka and Kanaka Maoli poet Brandy Nālani McDougall represent the embodied experiences of moving through and with the ocean, Suzuki demonstrates how we can reimagine emplaced identity in ways that meaningfully supports Kanaka Maoli sovereignty.

In her final chapter, “Virtual Passages: Pacific Futures,” Suzuki rounds out the study by analyzing how all forms of ocean passage—whether militarized, refugee, commercial, or embodied—evolve in tandem with contemporary technologies to articulate different futures of the Pacific Ocean. She turns to the work of Pacific Island poets Robert Sullivan (Māori), Emelihter Kihleng (Pohnpei), and Craig Santos Perez (Chamorro) to read alongside *A Tale for the Time Being* by Japanese American-Canadian novelist Ruth Ozeki, and demonstrates how these representations disrupt the hegemonic narrative of transpacific futures that are governed by a teleology of capitalist progress that requires securitization. For Suzuki, the way these texts highlight the cyclical within the oceanic, and alternative temporalities

shaped by Oceanic epistemologies. They open up for us oceanic imaginaries and paradigms of relational navigation that can help us dismantle colonial networks and infrastructures, and explore alternative ways of living and being together in the world.

Bahng and Suzuki question whether the term “transpacific” can ever be more than provisional (12). While the transpacific is a social construct like any other geographical category, and therefore should be as provisional as any other social construct, *Ocean Passages* demonstrates how transpacific studies can evolve and continue to be a generative framing for counterhegemonic, decolonial research across disciplines. Centering the Indigenous Pacific—which is a fundamentally anti-imperial orientation at the same time that it disrupts the legitimacy of the modern nation-state—should have been vital to the work that transpacific studies set out to do in the first place.

## Notes

1. Naoki Sakai and Hyon Joo Yoo, eds., *The Trans-Pacific Imagination: Rethinking Boundary, Culture and Society* (Singapore: World Scientific Pub. Co., 2012); Viet Nguyen and Janet Hoskins, eds., *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014). ↩
2. For example, see the work of Candance Fujikane, Jonathan Okamura, Dean Saranillo, Lisa Kahaleole Hall, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, Aimee Bahng, Jinah Kim, Nitasha Sharma, and Quynh Nhu Le. Jinah Kim and Nitasha Sharma have pointed out how the increased use of “Trans-Pacific” as a keyword in Asian American Studies tends “to fly over Oceania, erasing Pacific Islanders while invoking the Pacific.” Jinah Kim and Nitasha Sharma, eds., “Interventions in Pacific Islands Studies and Trans-Pacific Studies,” special issue, *Critical Ethnic* 7, no. 2 (2021). ↩
3. Erin Suzuki and Aimee Bahng, “The Transpacific Subject in Asian American Culture,” *Oxford Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature and Culture*, 2021. ↩

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## Author Information



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Sandra So Hee Chi Kim is Visiting Assistant Professor of Asian American Studies at The Claremont Colleges and a visiting scholar in University of Southern California's Department of American Studies and Ethnicity. Her research explores the intersections of race, global coloniality, migration, and culture. Her work has appeared in *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, *Positions: Asia Critique*, *Korean Studies*, *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, and *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*. She is currently working on a book manuscript entitled *The Kinship of Empires: Transpacific Coloniality and Korean Historical Trauma*. She is also

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## Article details

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## Review of *Mapping Abundance for a Planetary Future: Kanaka Maoli and Critical Settler Cartographies in Hawai'i* by Candace Fujikane (Duke University Press)

by Hi'ilei Julia Hobart | Book Reviews, Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

**ABSTRACT** Employing the teachings of Indigenous cartographic practices to trouble the Western epistemologies of subdivision that underpin private property development, Candace Fujikane's *Mapping Abundance for a Planetary Future* charts out an unabashedly hopeful vision for futures that exceed the dictates of capitalist accumulation. Abundance, as Fujikane shows throughout, is not an ungrounded future wish, or a hazily-defined otherwise that we must collectively imagine. It has already been mapped out for us by Indigenous peoples—in her example, Kanaka Maoli—who have long thrived according to fundamental philosophies of cultivation and relationality.

**KEYWORDS** Indigenous peoples, environment, Hawai'i, geography, mapping

*Mapping Abundance for a Planetary Future: Kanaka Maoli and Critical Settler Cartographies in Hawai'i*. By Candace Fujikane. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2021. 304 pp., 53 illustrations. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1168-2. US List: \$27.95.

*Mapping Abundance for a Planetary Future* is a stunning book. Employing the teachings of Indigenous cartographic practices to trouble the Western epistemologies of subdivision that underpin private property development, Fujikane charts out an unabashedly hopeful vision for futures that exceed the dictates of capitalist accumulation. Abundance, as Fujikane shows throughout, is not an ungrounded future wish, or a hazily-defined otherwise that we must collectively imagine. It has already been mapped out for us by Indigenous peoples—in her example, Kanaka Maoli—who have long thrived according to fundamental philosophies of cultivation and relationality. Drawing on the work of David Lloyd, she argues that “abundance is both the objective and the limit of capital: the crisis for capital is that abundance raises the possibility of a just redistribution of resources” (4). Such an



intervention is elegant in its simplicity, and profound in its implications. What possibilities open up when we work towards reciprocity, sharing, and intergenerational plentitude?

These are questions that can easily travel beyond the grounded specificity of *Mapping Abundance*, and it is one of the reasons why Fujikane's work has—and will continue—to speak usefully across academic contexts beyond Hawai'i, applying to audiences in settler colonial studies, geography, economics, legal studies, anthropology, and environmental studies, to name a few. Even though it has broad appeal, it does not shirk the richness of detail that can sometimes be reserved for specialists in Hawaiian studies. Throughout the book, the reader is invited to move across Hawai'i's landscapes, waters, and histories as they are narrated by Kanaka Maoli epistemologies of place. Those stories then become the contemporary frameworks for understanding the ecological nuances of Hawai'i: paying attention to, for example, hydrological cycles as they are embodied by *akua* (deities) on Mauna a Wākea, otherwise known as Maunakea, reveals how elemental forms, such as mists, rains, and snow, speak to environmental needs for care and conservation. Indeed, as the water that accumulates on the mountain summit melts, it filters into the Waimea aquifer that is a vital water source for downslope residents of Hawai'i Island.

The book's chapters suture together traditions of Kanaka Maoli environmental knowledge and current-day struggles of land and water rights through the figure of the *mo'o*, or lizard. As a root word for various concepts of spatial relations, like *iwikuamo'o* (a backbone or a mountain ridgeway), *mo'o'āina* (smaller, connected land divisions with a larger ahupua'a land division), *mo'olelo* (storied histories), and *mo'okūauhau* (genealogical connections), the lizard narrates cartographic epistemologies that transcend, contradict, and amend Western forms of mapping that seek to isolate, enclose, and subdivide space according to private property logics. The chapters work as three sets of thematic and geographical pairs. The first two focus on the district of Wai'anae on Maui Island, where Fujikane exemplifies *mo'o'āina* as a method of Indigenous mapping, applying it to community activist strategies to resist corporate development of spaces deemed "wastelands." The second two chapters turn to Moku O Keawe, or Hawai'i Island, where land and water protectors have been standing against the construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope. Drawing upon understandings of human and more-than-human relationships with water and rocks, Fujikane shows how genealogical understandings of space can help to inform decisions in the present that support projects of abundance over those of extraction. A final pair of chapters attend to the waterways along the Ko'olau mountain range on O'ahu Island, which are currently threatened by subterranean infrastructures built in the service of military and corporate development, and to which community-based agri- and aqua-cultural restoration projects respond. Offered as a set, Kanaka Maoli environmental knowledge appears as a future-oriented and anti-capitalist epistemology.

Within a growing body of literature that thinks critically about what solidarity with Indigenous communities looks like—particularly by academics who write and theorize about land and territory under regimes of settler colonialism—this contribution stands out for its careful engagement. Fujikane identifies as a settler *aloha ‘āina*—“a land and water protector who affirms Kanaka Maoli independence” (12)—who has given countless hours of labor in support of the myriad legal battles being fought for the protection of Hawai‘i’s environment. These personal commitments emerge within the pages of this book, though there is no settler savior complex to be found within. Instead, Fujikane centers and uplifts the wisdom and actions of those alongside whom she has worked. Anyone familiar with Native Hawaiian activism will see the hundreds of familiar names and faces that she takes care to foreground in the text. Indeed, the sheer length of the book’s acknowledgements testifies to the author’s commitment to community-oriented activist scholarship.

I believe that pointing out potential shortcomings of this exceptional book is counterproductive, given the many fields of study that it contributes to. However, it is worth noting the fresh questions that emerge out of *abundance*, which Fujikane powerfully formulates as that which promises to address capitalism’s foreclosure of decolonization. Namely, this reader is left wondering the following: Where do ideas around excess or deficit remain weaponized against Black and brown communities whose bodies have been deemed too fecund, personalities too extra, and appetites too big by colonial society? At what point, and for whom, does abundance index “enough,” rather than “too much?” For diverse communities, comprised of people with many differential racial, class, educational, and bodily privileges who work coalitionally to protect environments from devastation, Fujikane’s careful methodology offers scholars tools to approach these questions with a deep and abiding commitment to the specificity of people and the places to which they find themselves obligated.

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Hi‘ilei Julia Hobart is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at UT Austin and holds a PhD in Food Studies from New York University. Her writing and research is broadly concerned with Indigenous foodways, Pacific Island studies, settler colonialism, urban infrastructure, and the performance of taste. Her book, *Cooling the Tropics: Ice, Indigeneity, and Hawaiian Refreshment* (forthcoming from Duke University Press), on the social history of comestible ice in Hawai‘i investigates the thermal dimensions of Native Hawaiian dispossession.

[View all of Hi'ilei Julia Hobart's articles.](#)

## Article details

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## Review of *A Violent Peace: Race, U.S. Militarism, and Cultures of Democratization in Cold War Asia and the Pacific* by Christine Hong (Stanford University Press)

by Annie Hui | Book Reviews, Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

**ABSTRACT** Christine Hong's *A Violent Peace* examines local and global democratization projects and the many ways that postwar US military tactics and strategies functioned to suppress both counterrevolutionaries abroad in Asia and Black radicals at home in the US. Through literary and visual analyses of works by Ralph Ellison, Ōe Kenzaburō, Miné Okubo, Carlos Bulosan, James Baldwin, and W. E. B. Du Bois, Hong questions how to navigate US post-World War II policies that claim a period of democratized "peace" and racial integration while simultaneously dehumanizing "foreign" bodies through military tactics that police cultural and political belonging.

**KEYWORDS** Cold War, militarism, race, democracy, Asia

*A Violent Peace: Race, U.S. Militarism, and Cultures of Democratization in Cold War Asia and the Pacific.* By Christine Hong. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020, 320 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-5036-1291-4. US List: \$30.00

In *A Violent Peace*, Christine Hong focuses on the blurring of local and global democratization projects and unpacks the ways that postwar US military tactics and strategies functioned both to quell counterrevolutionary movements in Asia, and to suppress Black radicals through domestic war operations. By looking at the intersections between domestic and foreign policing of dissent and the policies that ensured necropolitical efficiency, Hong theorizes US militarism's centrality to the political and cultural imagination of racialized peoples within an era of US military and imperial expansion abroad, and a rising police state at home. Drawing from works by key Asian, Asian American, and Black thinkers, artists, and writers, Hong argues for a reframing of US post-World War II policies to recognize that claims of global democratizing efforts and local racial integration were in fact military tactics that worked to police "foreign" bodies within the US imaginary.

Hong begins in chapter one, "'Democracy within the Teeth of Fascism': The Black POW and the Invisible War at Home in Ralph Ellison's War Writings," by focusing on the "invisible" war at home against Black Americans, the state's role in fostering racial inequality post-1945, and the fascist dimensions of US democracy in creating a racialized internal enemy. Framing her analysis through the works of Ralph Ellison, Hong argues that the democratic future of Black Americans rested on state-endorsed Black visibility and incorporation within "the constraints of hyperpatriotic military form" (39), echoing Claudia Jones's phrase "Jim Crow in uniform" (10). Hong reads Ellison's writing as making visible the "war within wars" (9)—or the struggle for Black freedom within the context of global wars—and as challenging the idea that Black Americans in uniform signal racial equality and inclusion.

Chapter two, "Revolution from Above: Ōe Kenzaburō, the Black Airman, and Occupied Japan," examines US military-imperial exploits in Asia and the Pacific. Considering Ōe Kenzaburō's literary works as exposés, Hong explores the complex racial and colonial dimensions of the postwar "Pacific theater" that highlight the contrast of racial liberalization within the US military, and illiberal expansionism in the Pacific. The symbolic resonance of military planes in Ōe's works illustrate the racial logic of asymmetrical warfare and the aerial threat that US national security posed to Japanese democracy. While the desegregation of the US military was hailed as evidence of democratic strength, Jim Crow policies at home and the US policies in occupied Japan spoke to the US war machine's fascist and necropolitical functions. Although the incorporation of racialized bodies in US military affairs created possibilities for "linking black pilot and Asian target" (59), this racial solidarity was premised on the common dehumanization of "foreign" bodies.

Chapter three, "A Blueprint for Occupied Japan: Miné Okubo and the American Concentration Camp," continues Hong's theme of "democracy within the teeth of fascism" (22) in the US and the Pacific by considering visualizations of the citizen-subject of Japan in Miné Okubo's drawings of interned Japanese Americans. Okubo's *Citizen 13660* illustrates the dehumanization of Japanese bodies and questions a carceral system that conflates race with the enemy. Hong argues that this logic of an "enemy alien" and "enemy nation" set the stage for a democratization project at home as a means to rehabilitate Japan and Japanese Americans. Okubo's commissioned portraits of camp life in *Fortune* magazine aligned with assimilationist objects precisely because they illustrated citizen and imperial subjects as "ripe for democratization" (82).

In chapter four, "Possessive Investment in Ruin: The Target, the Proving Ground, and the U.S. War Machine in the Nuclear Pacific," Hong presents varied sources of literature and art to unpack the memory of the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Marshall Islands. Hong begins by looking at GI tourism in Hiroshima to draw attention to the commercialization of the bodies of *Hibakusha* ("bomb-impacted person," or survivors of

the Nagasaki and Hiroshima atomic bombs), arguing that the romanticized narrative of US victory displaces that horror of atomic violence and plays to the US's investment in violence. Furthermore, Hong elaborates that the limited historical consciousness fostered by Hibakusha literature renders Hiroshima as an atrocity tale that disregards the need for redress or reparations. This in turn allowed for a future-oriented US narrative of postwar Japan, at once legitimating the bombing as "peaceful violence" and "atoms for peace" and "sutur[ing] democracy to the fearsome power of the American bomb" (113–4).

Chapter five, "People's War, People's Democracy, People's Epic: Carlos Bulosan, U.S. Counterintelligence, and Cold War Unreliable Narration," focuses on counterintelligence and "the idea of human terrain" (140) as seen through Carlos Bulosan's novels and other Filipino works about guerilla resistance to US military rule. Hong concentrates on guerilla warfare of the Philippine revolutionary struggle for democracy and national liberation and theorizes the "asymmetrical warfare's indiscriminate brutality" (138) as a "logic of indistinction" that conflates targets as their location. The legal distinction between civilian and combatant is blurred, as are the categorical differences between humans and terrain. For Hong, in "classic counterinsurgent fashion" (142), the rhetoric of terror was used by the Bush administration to justify US war and police power overseas.

Chapter six, "The Enemy at Home: Urban Warfare and the Russell Tribunal on Vietnam," continues Hong's discussion on counterinsurgency and revolutionary struggles for democracy at home. Hong draws on Black revolutionary discourse to illustrate the ways that human rights were envisioned as a weapon against imperialism. Racial counterintelligence, central in the US war in Vietnam, was equally crucial to the war at home, as it decided which groups and individuals endangered national security. The "perceived threat" of both Black bodies in US ghettos and the Vietnamese in villages abroad shows how racial profiling in the language of counterinsurgency presumes guilt not just by association, but by location. Again, this chapter attempts to reveal how, in postwar efforts, the turn to racial liberalism domestically and the integrationist aims in the Pacific were all carried out under the guise of multiracial democracy.

In the concluding chapter, "Militarized Queerness: Racial Masking and the Korean War Mascot," Hong calls attention to a queer legacy of militarized racial inclusion as seen in the Korean War. She looks at the Korean War mascot as performing necropolitical labor aimed at accommodating US military personnel overseas. Photographs of soldiers and child mascots reveal the eroticization of mascots and "imply uncertain and unsettling 'feelings' across the color line" (214). Hong notes that the South Korean camptown is not only a site of sexual exploitation, but also a racially queer space. She reads the camptown's shadow economy of sex trafficking and labor exploitation of Korean women and young girls and boys as a "liminal biopolitical space between nations" (217).

Hong's work expands the cultural archive of the nuclear Pacific and makes visible the story of race in Pax Americana to contend with the "dramas of democratization" that purport a period of peace. In showing how US military tactics and strategies are easily transposed from "unruly" populations at home to the "enemies" abroad, Hong's book greatly contributes to studies of the intersections between race, military, democracy, and cultural imaginings across fields ranging from Asian American studies, critical race studies, cultural studies, and comparative literature. Each chapter can be read as a standalone essay, which may be particularly useful for teaching purposes. Hong's work as a whole is an important contribution to the history of post-war US that recenters racialized humanity to illustrate the military-imperial violence that minimized the structures in which race was targeted, captured, and mobilized.

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Annie Hui is a PhD candidate in the Cultural Studies program at George Mason University. Her research focuses on the political uses and implications of mass cultural images and symbols in contemporary social protest movements.

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## Review of *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists* by Wazhmah Osman (University of Illinois Press)

by Aparna Shastri | Book Reviews, Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

**ABSTRACT** This review examines Wazhmah Osman's book *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars*, an ethnographic study of television media in Afghanistan. The book explores the Afghan mediascape through richly detailed interviews with media industry professionals and local Afghans, which provide a realist portrayal of the perils and triumphs of media houses in Afghanistan, local cultural contestations, changing gender norms, and the role and reception of television in the nation's rather tumultuous political and cultural life. Osman deflates the dominant notion in Western discourses of Afghanistan as a "hopeless landscape of powerless people," (2) arguing that there is a thriving, internationally backed media infrastructure and a hopeful, culturally conscious citizenry in the nation. She argues that despite Afghanistan's history of violence, ethnic tensions, atrocities against women, and imperialistic agendas by foreign powers, the Afghan media sector is a widely accessible platform for retribution against years of underdevelopment and war, with "the potential to underwrite democracy, national integration, and peace" (3).

**KEYWORDS** media, imperial, representation, gender, war, ethnography, television, Afghanistan

*Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists.* By Wazhmah Osman. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020, 288 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-0-2520-8545-1. US List: \$28.00.

In *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists*, academic and filmmaker Wazhmah Osman examines the changing mediascape of Afghanistan with keen, detailed, and compelling insights. Based on over a hundred interviews with media stakeholders, industry specialists, scholars, and "a cross section of Afghans ranging from those living in slums to presidential candidates and religious leaders," (20) the goal of the book is to "redirect global dialogue about Afghanistan to local Afghans



themselves" (2). Using extensive ethnographic studies of Afghan television media centers, conducted from 2008 to 2014, while closely examining the influx of internationally supported media infrastructures, the historical context of television in Afghanistan, and the deep-rooted cultural and political conflicts of the nation, Osman has effectively accomplished what turns out to be "the first in-depth ethnography of the Afghan mediascape" (18).

Divided into six chapters all centering on different aspects of the television industry in Afghanistan, the book is an all-encompassing, deeply-researched endeavor with strikingly bold commentary on the ways in which attempts by Afghan leaders to establish a modern and progressive Afghanistan were trampled by decades of war and terrorism, leading to the downfall and destabilization of a nation with immense developmental possibilities. As argued in the book, at the center of the chaos is television. The incessant discord between the functionality of television in the Afghan society, televisual representations of women, and an extremist interpretation of Islam by the religious Right has thwarted development endeavors in the region and "instigated a series of escalating battles among Islamists, moderates, and others" (3). It is interesting to note that Osman's investigation of Afghanistan's rising televisual mediascape was born out of a research interest in women's rights and local cultural contestations, thus providing readers an idea of how definitive the struggle for women's rights has been in the country and how television as a stimulating visual technological tool has played a role in the evolution of sociocultural gender norms.

The first chapter, "Legitimizing Modernity: Indigenous Modernities, Foreign Incursions, and Their Backlashes," describes modernization attempts by local people and governments in Afghanistan while also addressing fundamental questions about the very idea of modernity and the assumption of western modernity as a definitive litmus test for progress. To contextualize the motives of foreign powers in Afghanistan, which included "aggrandizing their own geopolitical and economic interests" (51) starting from the British Raj to the Soviet occupation, to interferences of the United States, Osman theorizes two kinds of gazes—the "imperial" and the "developmental." A recurring theme in the following chapters, the two gazes have varying degrees of similarities and differences and serve as a framework in analyzing the motivations of foreign powers that have made their way into Afghanistan. This chapter provides important historical contextualization for the ensuing discussions on developmental hurdles in Afghanistan, specifically in the media sector. It provides detailed accounts of development agendas that aimed to improve women's lives and provide a safe and wholesome education to all children, along with an analysis of imperialistic agendas disguised as modernizing missions by foreign powers.

Chapter Two, "Imperialism, Globalization, and Development: Overlaps and Disjunctures," continues exploring several developmental projects in Afghanistan on a case-by-case

basis. Osman distinguishes between positive-intentioned development projects as being ground up, collaborative, financially equitable in nature, and characterizes imperialistic projects as “top-down, shortsighted, and duplicitous” (79). She addresses the following question: “How are Afghanistan’s specific geographic location at the border of Central and South Asia, and distinctive sociocultural position, dominated by Indian, Iranian, Turkish, and Western media products and at the margins of Arab and Russian influence, shaping or impeding its development?” (56). By tracing the evolving meaning of the term “globalization” and drawing from Arjun Appadurai, Partha Chatterjee, and Herbert Schiller, among many others, she emphasizes the “limitations of working within ‘global’ institutional bodies that are not equitably global” (61). She points out that the assertion of US hegemony by imperialistic tactics like funding of media infrastructures and jurisdiction over Afghan airspace has been prevalent in over two decades of war in the region, the outcome being the death of thousands, and developmental stagnancy.

In Chapter Two, Osman also elaborates on four prominent schools of thought within global media studies- cultural imperialism, development communication, globalization theories, and hybridity. Discussing the former two in context of her project, she states that while cultural imperialism and development communication are often considered oppositional theories, her goal in this book is to “bridge these schools of thought so that one’s claims do not always negate the other’s but can exist simultaneously” (60).

In Chapter Three, “Afghan Television Production: A Distinctive Political Economy,” Osman provides a detailed analysis of the television outlets in Afghanistan—their affiliations, ideologies, functionalities, and strategies. Drawing from multiple interviews with television station managers and owners, Osman categorizes Afghan television stations into three groups: national, sectarian, and niche. While niche television stations seek to preserve the quintessential traditions, songs, languages etc. of their own ethnic groups and also serve a national purpose by preserving the cultural diversity of Afghanistan, it may enter the “dangerous terrain of sectarianism by catalyzing deep-seated ethnic tensions and violence” (95). Therefore, Osman asserts that sectarian television does not contend with the vision of an inclusive, multiethnic Afghanistan and “cannot be categorized as nationally minded” (95). This chapter also extensively examines content creation processes and content variety within the Afghan television industry, be it avidly viewed reality TV shows; or popular Afghan, Indian, and Turkish dramatic serials; or political satire and youth-oriented programming.

The fourth chapter, “Producers and Production: The Development Gaze and the Imperial Gaze,” explores the contrasts between the concept of television in Western and non-Western nations by tracing relevant scholarship in television studies. From incidents of protests and violence on the streets, to the historical marginalization faced by ethnic

minorities , to the unwavering anti-war and pro-justice ideologies of media makers, Osman elaborates on the impact of television content on the day-to-day lives of Afghans. For instance, Osman examines the animated series *Yassin and Kaka Raouf*, a story that follows the journey of two war-orphans who are adopted by their law-abiding uncle, Raouf, in a newly developing Afghanistan. This is one of the many examples discussed in the chapter which illustrate how Afghan TV content portrays the brutalities of life, on the one hand, and human rights, democracy, and justice, on the other.

Chapter Five, "Reaching Vulnerable and Dangerous Populations: Women and the Pashtuns," provides a comprehensive look at the media depictions of two targets of the international as well as internal Afghan development gaze—women, in need of "saving" or "uplift," and ethnic Pashtuns. The Pashtuns have been historically seen as a volatile group, and owing to colonial and Orientalist accounts, they've been "both valorized for their bravery and heroics and also stigmatized as warlike and militant" (141). Thus, they've increasingly been seen as susceptible to joining insurgent groups like the Taliban, and have consequently become the focus of the "colonial gaze and civilizing missions" (141). Osman also establishes how Afghan media producers are actively pursuing issues of women's rights and ethnic inclusivity through both their content as well as production practices by discussing issues pertaining to culturally sensitive television content, incidents of gender-based violence and honor killing, and the misogynist extremism of the Taliban.

In Chapter Six, "Reception and Audiences: The Demands and Desires of Afghan People," Osman delves into reception and audience studies and finds that Afghan audiences—who are slowly reviving from the struggles of four war-torn decades—expect television to serve as a means of justice and retribution from their long-drawn struggles of war and gender violence. The popularity of Indian, Iranian, and Turkish dramatic serials is attributed to an escape that these shows provide from the real struggles of Afghan women often portrayed in Afghan content. It is also noted that Afghan audiences appreciate content that retains its "Afghan-ness" or specific cultural codes, and "an Afghan universe of references" (196) without judging it on its production quality.

Celebrating the media sector as the antidote to corruption, warlords, and foreign interests, Osman affirms the positive role that it is now playing in the escalation of social justice and collective public awareness. By unveiling the rich ethnic and cultural diversity of Afghanistan and its complicated relationship with the television medium, Osman carefully establishes the historical, current, and imminent significance of television in the Afghan sociocultural framework. She underscores how the "Afghan media is challenging oppressive forces and institutions by making them accountable to the tribunal of the people" (215). Animated by Osman's personal insights, this in-depth media ethnography offers both a macroscopic glance at the play of global forces, along with microscopic

perspectives of crucial local ingredients of the Afghan mediascape, thus providing readers a holistic account of Afghanistan's national and cultural history at large. The book is an immensely insightful and exemplary contribution to media studies of the Global South.

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## Author Information



### Aparna Shastri

Aparna Shastri is a first-year doctoral student of Cultural Studies at George Mason University. Her research interests include contemporary visual culture, global television studies, South Asian cinema studies, and postcolonial studies. She holds an MA in Writing, Rhetoric, and Media from Clemson University.

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## Article details

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## Review of *Dear Science and Other Stories* by Katherine McKittrick (Duke University Press)

by Jade How and Gada Mahrouse | Book Reviews, Issue 11.1 (Spring 2022)

**ABSTRACT** With *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Katherine McKittrick does the work of liberation and enacts new ways of being. Building on her previous studies, this collection engages in a story-sharing, collaborative praxis that emerges from a “black sense of place.” McKittrick’s Black and anti-colonial methodologies are “rebellious,” “relational, intertextual, and interdisciplinary”—thereby “breaching” the “recursive,” “self-replicating” logics of “our present order of knowledge” (44, 2, 23, 163). *Dear Science* invents, reinvents, and reimagines “being human as praxis” through an aesthetic practice of deciphering theoretical texts, photographs, sounds, dance, and song (159). Illustrating her commitment to Black intellectual life, McKittrick writes, listens, and feels in communion with other creatives. In so doing, McKittrick skillfully bursts open the gatekeeping conventions that limit thought, and challenges readers to question what they think they know.

**KEYWORDS** Black studies, colonialism, science, methodology, biocentricity, relationality, space

*Dear Science and Other Stories*. By Katherine McKittrick. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021, 240 pp. (paperback) ISBN 9781478011040. US List: \$24.95

Katherine McKittrick’s *Dear Science and Other Stories* is an invitation to think and feel *outside* of our delimiting biocentric system of knowledge. This collection of stories and photographs theoretically/visually/sonically interrupts academic conventions with an interdisciplinary methodology that “is disobedient (rogue, rebellious, black)” (44). At every level of form, McKittrick’s stories (presented in columns, footnotes, lists, photographs, dances, or songs) are acts of rebellion. Notably, the book is not divided into numbered chapters, and the stories can be read in any order. Instead, *Dear Science* reverberates and resonates as “waveforms”—nonlinear, not teleological, not eschatological, not rigid, not fixed. Each connected story “exceeds all efforts to definitively pin it down”—purposefully evading description, categorization, systematization, and summation (71).

To engage with *Dear Science* is to fall in love with the world-making words of Sylvia Wynter, Édouard Glissant, and Frantz Fanon all over again. Wynter and McKittrick remind us that we are a “storytelling species” (9) who are steeped in, and struggle through, language—telling ourselves (and each other) stories in order to survive and make sense of the world around us. *Dear Science* narrates *different* stories about Black method and methodology, science, algorithms, music, geography, Black studies, liberation, friendships, collaboration, joy, memories, and Black livingness. Put another way, with *Dear Science*, McKittrick is “bringing human invention into existence”—«le véritable saut»<sup>1</sup> (“the real leap”) that Fanon indexes (57).

Following Glissant’s notions of “errantry and relation and opacity,” as readers we reoriented ourselves with/in the text—with the story titles and subtitles serving as signposts (32). If, as McKittrick instructs, to “read creative texts as theoretical texts,” her work enables the reader to wonder and wander (119). Our curiosity leads us back to her second story, “Footnotes (Books and Papers Scattered about the Floor),” which exemplifies her rebellious, story-sharing, collaborative praxis. McKittrick writes, listens, and feels in communion with other creatives. We noticed that the footnotes exceeded the main text, then realized that the whole story is a footnote that leaves irreducible traces of Black life, world-making, and theorizing scattered across geographic space and time.

Oscillating back and forth between different stories, readers are re/introduced to work of M. NourbeSe Philip, Dionne Brand, Toni Morrison, W. E. B. Du Bois, Drexciya, Betty Davis, and many more. Returning to the main text, readers learn lessons from Wynter and McKittrick about our “present order of knowledge” (163) as “self-replicating” (23). Specifically, they learn that “radical theory-making takes place outside existing systems of knowledge and that this place, outside (demonic grounds), is inhabited by those who are brilliantly and intimately aware of existing systems of knowledge” (23). This process is conceptually rigorous, exhaustive, and heavy. As McKittrick demonstrates, “Citing is not easy. Referencing is hard” (17). McKittrick compels readers to ask more generative epistemological questions (how we know what we know) and rethink “*where* we know from” (107). As we were writing this review, we listened to Betty Davis’s “They Say I’m Different” in the background (see the photograph on page 94, the playlist on page 122, and footnote 8 on page 16). We sat with metaphor, citations, and sites of possibility; and we were reminded how “the ideas we share, the counsel we give each other—is an ongoing referential conversation about black humanity” (33).

From a “black sense of place” as a methodology attentive to relationality, McKittrick brings her readers where quantitative data and positivist mappings cannot. For instance, McKittrick’s story about writing an entry on “diaspora” for the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* is instructive. We observed how the discipline’s colonial authority—

whereby space is “knowable” and “transparent”—is reified (180). Rather than cataloguing, making lists, and drawing maps in normative ways, we were once again invited to think outside of our present geographic order of knowledge that is underwritten by a “biocentrally induced accumulation by dispossession” (3, 74). Put differently, McKittrick’s “project of disavowal” is not about disciplining or institutionalizing diaspora in a fixed way (180). Instead, she posits that “diaspora geography” is “the act of sharing ideas about where liberation is and might be” (182). Throughout the book, McKittrick repeatedly illustrates how: “Description is not liberation” (39, 44, 45, 128). As a conceptual frame, Black studies engages in the ongoing “intellectual struggle” of seeking out liberation and aesthetically enacting what Wynter and McKittrick refer to as “being human as praxis” (70, 159).

McKittrick’s *Dear Science* is generous and expansive—disrupting normative disciplinary approaches often rehearsed in academic writing. It demands careful engagement and deep study. Whenever readers feel that they have a firm “grasp” on an idea, a place, or way of being, McKittrick unsettles the theoretical grounds beneath us. For “readers *from elsewhere*” who “want [and need] to understand everything,” *Dear Science* is a profoundly destabilizing and disorientating experience (in the best sense of the word) (171). By this we mean that we need to rethink what we cannot know and cannot have. Reading this book will, borrowing from Fanon, cause your heart to make your head swim («Le coeur me tourne la tête»<sup>2</sup>) (1).

## Notes

1. Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 186. ↩

2. Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, 113. ↩

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# Author Information

## Jade How

Jade How completed her MA in the Individualized Program (INDI) at Concordia University. Her interdisciplinary project interrogates the relationship between race, place, and space and adds to the existing canon on women of color as the theoreticians of their own lives.

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## Gada Mahrouse

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